The New Criterion

December 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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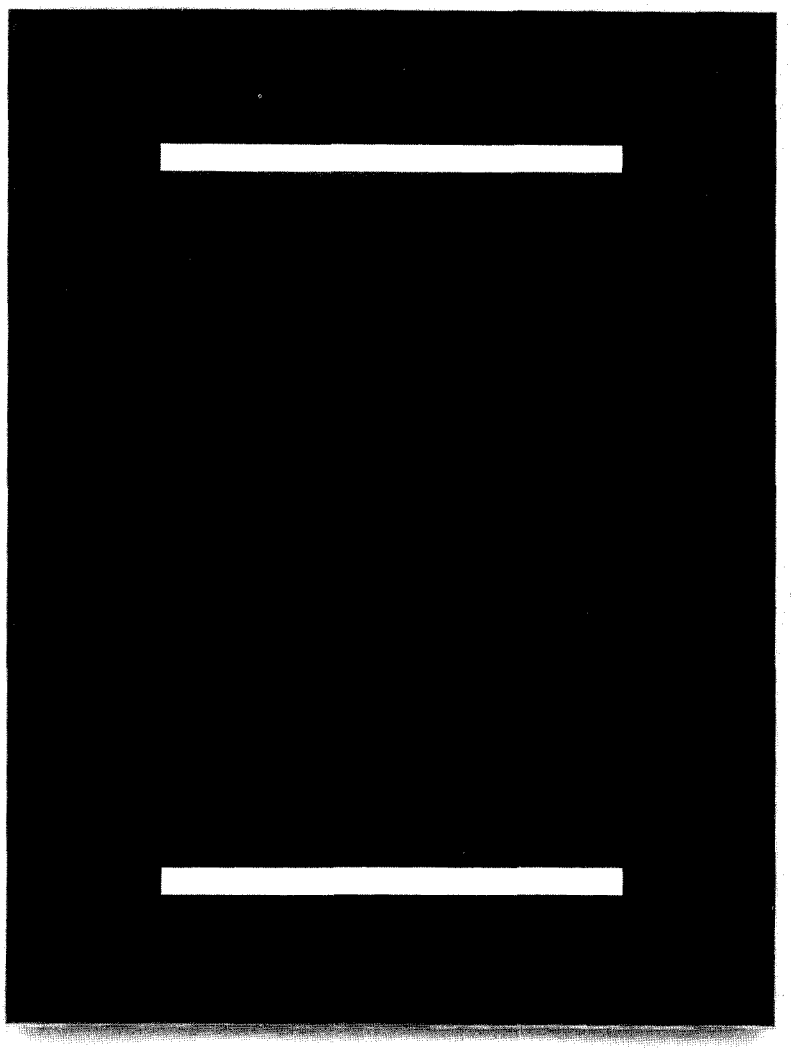

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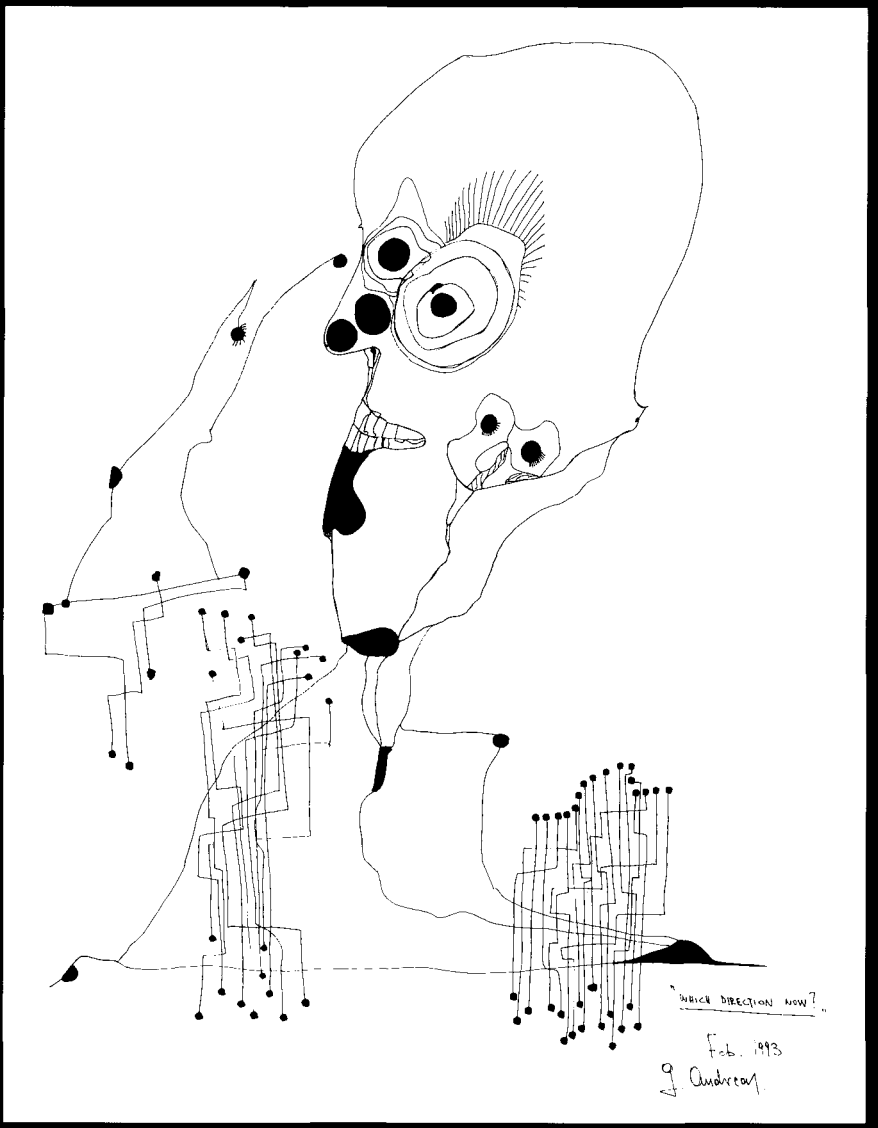

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Notes & Comments: December 1993

Redefining deviancy

Everyone knows that there are many things dreadfully wrong with American society today. It takes only a fifteen-minute visit to any major city to recognize that the moral glue that holds society together is rapidly dissolving. Flagrant drug use, burglary, and violent crime, widespread homelessness and illegitimacy: these are a few of the more conspicuous pathologies of urban (and, increasingly, suburban) life in America today.

And yet, while everyone knows that these prominent features of modern life are a terrible bane, not everyone is willing to acknowledge it publicly. Various strategies of denial have been concocted to circumvent the pressing reality of our situation, from willful blindness to elaborate rationalization. One of the most common and destructive forms of denial was brilliantly anatomized by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in a recent essay in *The American Scholar* called "Defining Deviancy Down." Senator Moynihan pointed out there that instead of honestly confronting the alarming deviancy of urban life today, many policy makers and commentators have indulged in a tendency to deny it by redefining deviancy. Thus it is that the threshold of acceptable levels of deviancy has been pushed up and up and up: what would have been unthinkable yesterday is business as usual today.

It works like this: Are nearly 30 percent of all children born in the U.S. now born out of wedlock? No problem: simply redefine what counts as a family and pretend that illegitimacy carries with it no moral or social onus. Were there 93,000 patients in New York's mental hospitals in 1955 and only 11,000 in 1992? Are the other 82,000 now to be found raving on city streets? No problem: What we have here is not deviancy but a failure of the welfare state to provide properly for this segment of the underclass.

This sort of thinking extends even to the most violent of crimes. Senator Moynihan reminds us that the infamous St. Valentine's Day massacre in 1929—an event that riveted national attention and made its way into the history books—consisted of four thugs killing seven other thugs: an ordinary weekend's work in Los Angeles these days.

Although defining deviancy down is dangerous and destructive, it is only half the story. In *The New Republic* for November 22, Charles Krauthammer has outlined the other half of the story in a penetrating article called "Defining Deviancy Up: The New Assault on Bourgeois Life." What Mr. Krauthammer describes as the "moral deregulation of the 1960s" has two parts. On the one hand, deviant behavior is tamed (or at least camouflaged) by being redefined as normal; on the other hand, since what we are witnessing is a "vast social project of moral leveling," normal behavior is scrutinized for unsus-

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pected forms of deviancy. Mr. Krauthammer comments: "Large areas of ordinary behavior hitherto considered benign have had their threshold radically redefined up, so that once innocent behavior now stands condemned as deviant."

This process of "defining deviancy up" begins by seizing on real crimes and instances of deviancy; it then redefines them so that they cover a much wider spectrum of behavior. Mr. Krauthammer gives several examples. In family life, there is the issue of child abuse: a horrible crime, but one whose prevalence has been wildly exaggerated. In 1963, Mr. Krauthammer points out, there were 150,000 cases of child abuse reported; one-third were dismissed as groundless. In 1992, there were 2.9 *million* cases reported (a 19-fold increase), with about two-thirds of those being dismissed for lack of evidence. Compare this to what has happened to "ordinary" crime: two out of three ordinary crimes are not reported, whereas two out of three cases of child abuse are now "shown never to have occurred."

Not that something's actually having happened is always the criterion for guilt. We live now with a veritable ideology of child abuse where fantasies are often deliberately mistaken for reality. Under the influence of this ideology, Mr. Krauthammer writes, "the helping professions, committed to a belief in endemic abuse, have encouraged a massive search to find cases, and where they cannot be found, to invent them." Thus it is that one popular self-help book proclaims that "If you are unable to remember any specific instances [of childhood sex abuse] . . . but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did."

We have seen an analogous process at work in relations between the sexes with the proliferation of charges of "date rape." Mr. Krauthammer notes that rape "used to be understood as involving the use or threat of force. No longer. It has now been expanded by the concept of date rape to encompass an enormous continent of behavior that had long been viewed as either normal or ill-mannered, but certainly not criminal." According to some "studies," one out of four women on campus is raped before graduating. But this grotesquely bloated figure can only be arrived at by totally redefining what counts as rape. (One survey question: "Have you given in to sexual intercourse when you didn't want to because you were overwhelmed by a man's continual arguments and pressure?") According to a detailed FBI report, the real occurrence of rape on campus in 1991 was about one in a thousand, or one half a rape per college campus.

Irresponsible and unfounded charges of rape are part of the movement to define deviancy up—in this case to delegitimize normal heterosexual relations and redefine them as inherently aberrant. The feminist activist Andrea Dworkin crystallized this ideology when she declared that "Romance . . . is rape embellished with meaningful looks."

The phenomenon of political correctness is a third area where deviancy is being redefined to cover much normal behavior. Here again we start with a genuine social pathology—consider the racist activities of the Ku Klux Klan, for example—which is then distorted and redefined so that everyone is liable to the charge of being (say) racist. As Mr. Krauthammer notes, "The great arena for this project is the American academy," where an ill-considered word, look, or gesture can land one in a re-education seminar or lead to suspension or expulsion. But the thought police are at work outside the campus, too. Mr. Krauthammer recalls being interviewed recently by the FBI, who were running a security check on a friend. After the usual questions about his character and behavior they popped a new one: had his friend ever shown "any prejudice to a group based on race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, etc.?" Had he, perhaps, told an off-color joke? It was at this point that Mr. Krauthammer realized that insensitive speech has now attained "official status as a thought crime."

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In the end, the process of redefining deviancy must be understood as part of what Mr. Krauthammer describes as "an adventure in moral equivalence": "The deviant is declared normal. And the normal is unmasked as deviant. That, of course, makes us all much more morally equal." It doesn't really—reality still intrudes eventually—but it does help perpetuate the illusion of equality while egregious injustices are perpetrated in its name. In this respect, the new understanding of deviancy is all of a piece with the old radical idea that there was a "moral equivalence" between the Soviet Empire and Western democracies. OK, the Soviet regime was brutal, imperialistic, and murderous—but, says the moral equivocator, *so was the West.* The idea was, as Mr. Krauthammer puts it, that "We could match them crime for crime throughout the world." But of course we couldn't. The Soviet empire disintegrated under the weight of its exhausted ideology. Now aspects of that ideology have found a friendly home among the liberal elites here at home. It is an ideology built upon lies and a refusal to acknowledge the ordinary realities of moral life. It is heartening to know that this ideology cannot finally win out against the truth; it is profoundly disheartening to realize that its partisans can cause untold suffering and anguish before it is exposed and stamped out.

Not since "Mein Kampf" . . .

It is not exactly news that political passions often wreak great havoc with rational discourse. The twentieth century has furnished us with a vast inventory of the many ways in which extreme political views have corrupted language to a point where it is effectively severed from any discernible relation to the reality it is meant to describe. George Orwell was the consummate connoisseur of this dismal phenomenon, which is why the adjective "Orwellian" has come to denote the worst excesses to be found in the modern annals of language subverted for political purposes.

We were reminded of this malign development in our linguistic affairs recently when we read, in the London press, some of the more prominent and vociferous reviews of Margaret Thatcher's memoirs, *The Downing Street Years*. Even for those of us who have no illusions about the ethics of political journalists, these reviews came as something of a shock. This was not because of their disapproval of Lady Thatcher's policies and programs during her long tenure as Prime Minister; that was to be expected from liberal and hard-left journalists whose hatred of Lady Thatcher's conservative philosophy made the American journalistic establishment's attitude toward President Reagan seem almost admiring by comparison. What really shocked was the flight from historical reality which the language of these reviews often exhibited.

Do we exaggerate? There was, for example, a BBC radio talk show in which one journalist said of a crowded book-signing event at which a great many of Lady Thatcher's admirers turned up to have their copies of *The Downing Street Years* autographed that "nothing quite like this had been seen in Europe since Hitler's Nuremberg rallies." This struck us as an isolated incident of rhetorical extremism until we read, in the next day's issue of the prestigious *Independent on Sunday*, a long attack by Robert Harris that featured the following passage: "It comes as no surprise to find that her autobiography is shot through with malice, contempt, rage and hatred like no political memoir since—well, since *Mein Kampf*, to which it bears more than a passing resemblance."

Now what, you may wonder, has inspired an experienced journalist like Robert Harris to compare the memoirs of a leader of a great democracy to those of one of the most evil tyrants in all of history? The passages immediately cited by Mr. Harris in his review-article to support his outrageous charge are almost pathetically tepid, especially in relation to his attack. A certain John Biffen—in Mr. Harris's first citation from *The Downing Street Years*—is said to be described by Lady

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Thatcher as "rather less effective than I had hoped." This doesn't quite have the ring of Hitlerian rhetoric to our ears. Mr. Harris then went on as follows:

> John Nott's "vice was second thoughts." James Prior is "the false squire." Norman St John Stevas "turned indiscretion into a political principle." Mark Carlisle was "not a very effective Education Secretary." Francis Pym was "a gloomy Whig." David Howell "lacked creative political imagination and practical drive." Baroness Young "lacked the presence to lead the Lords."

We can only wonder whether Robert Harris has ever read *Mein Kampf*.

The truth is that political journalists write stronger, more vicious characterizations of people in public life every day of the week—and on both sides of the Atlantic—than the examples cited from *The Downing Street Years* in this passage.

What, then, is actually going on in these facile and irresponsible comparisons with *Mein Kampf*? Alas, it is journalists like Robert Harris who, however unconsciously, are in the business of emulating the rhetoric of *Mein Kampf*—the sordid business of demonizing political opponents instead of responding to them with reasoned political arguments. This, ironically, is what they accuse Lady Thatcher of doing in her memoirs, but it is what they do in their papers every day when there is a strong conservative government in power—and even, in Lady Thatcher's case, out of power but still very much in the public eye and in the public's affection.

Cookies are the least of it

This is a tough time for parody in the art world: fashionable taste keeps catching up with it, turning yesterday's wild spoof into today's work of genius. Take the case of Mike Kelley, a thirty-nine-year-old "artist" who currently has a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Mr. Kelley specializes in exhibiting grimy stuffed animals and dolls. Sometimes the toys are sewn together on baby blankets or felt backgrounds in obscene or grotesque ways; often his ensembles bear portentously suggestive titles, e.g., "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid," which adds an element of instant psychodrama. In other words, Mr. Kelley produces exactly the sort of pretentious, aesthetically low-cal rubbish that the Whitney Museum nowadays loves to foist off on the public as "difficult" or "challenging" art.

If Mr. Kelley's repellent fluff must be accorded the status of art—as we suppose it must, alas—it is only because of the violent semantic trauma that has lately been visited upon that much abused word. *Anything* today can count as art. So to call something "art" doesn't really tell us much. If it's ugly, pretentious, overpriced, and is somehow subsidized by the taxpayers, there's a good chance that it's art. If it's also obscene or blasphemous, it is almost certainly art. Hence the interesting question is no longer "Is it art?" but "Is it good art?" This of course is precisely the question that the art world—especially that segment of the art world represented by the Whitney Museum—cannot bear to face. In Mr. Kelley's case, the answer was best summed up by King Lear: "Never, never, never, never, never."

And yet Mr. Kelley's show at the Whitney has unsuspected virtues. Well, *one* unsuspected virtue: it has been the occasion of great hilarity in the art pages of *The New York Times*. Who would have thought that Roberta Smith, the *Times*'s most with-it critic, was a master humorist? Plodding humorlessness has hitherto been her conspicuous trademark. But in her review of Mr. Kelley's exhibition at the Whitney, Miss Smith reveals herself to be a wickedly funny parodist. Indeed, she has produced one of the most devastating parodies of contemporary journalistic art criticism we have ever seen.

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Miss Smith's strategy is simple: she pretends that the objects Mike Kelley exhibits are important, searching works of art, "often disturbing, sometimes beautiful and always demanding" works that "stridently question the complacency and hypocrisy of High Art and High Morals." It is as we say a simple strategy; but Miss Smith carries it out with a deadpan earnestness that is marvelous to behold. There are moments when one might almost think she was being serious. Item: About a large felt banner depicting a cookie jar and emblazoned with the words "Let's talk about disobeying," she writes that

> the phrase conjures an ambiguous stew of psychological, moral and sexual suggestions. There's a ring of Mother Superior authority that may stir some childhood memory of being caught with one's fingers where they shouldn't be. The words also have an almost thrilled conspiratorial tone, as if one had been apprehended by a fellow traveler who wants all the details. In addition, these evocations of punishment and pleasure converge along a path toward something darker: the words suggest a dominatrix speaking to a paying customer. Cookies are the least of it.

As an imitation of contemporary artspeak, this is practically flawless: a *tad* overdone, perhaps, but what an ear Miss Smith has for the going cliché! And imagine: a nun, some conspiratorial fellow travelers, a dominatrix, and cookies all in the space of a few sentences. Splendid!

We also have nothing but admiration for Miss Smith's masterly use of the words "mystic" and "mystical" to puff Mr. Kelley's work without exactly saying anything at all. She contends that one piece depicts the "lair of a rec-room mystic," while others are "seemingly mystical." Of his work as a whole, Miss Smith writes that Mr. Kelley "inscribes an enormous universe of good and evil, nature and culture; no fact of life or train of thought is beyond its ranting yet mystical reach. American history, psychology, yoga, scatology and bad jokes are just a few of its subjects." Yes, this modern Dante of the art world encompasses everything. And remember we're talking about stuffed animals and felt cutouts of cookie jars.

Miss Smith is at her absolute funniest when "placing" Mike Kelley's work in the history of art. Here her sense of absurdity goes into overdrive. She manages to keep a poker face while describing Mr. Kelley's "surprisingly elegant" "Garbage Drawings." These "piles of dirt and flying mud clods, extracted from the backgrounds of 'Sad Sack' cartoons, are excremental," she explains, but they nonetheless "arc and pirouette with tremendous verve." That's good, we admit, even if it's best not to contemplate her image over lunch. But here comes the *pièce de résistance*: "They"—the arcking, pirouetting excremental piles—"also define a rich but narrow drawing vocabulary, *similar to one you might get by isolating the clouds in Constable's drawings or the trees in Fragonard.*" We've added the emphasis out of appreciation for Miss Smith's bravura. No Mencken or Orwell or Waugh could have better savaged pompous art criticism than she does with these deliciously fantastic comparisons. "The clouds in Constable's drawings," "the trees in Fragonard": it's positively inspired.

Miss Smith is very big on highlighting the "subversive" and "challenging" elements in contemporary works of art, those features that supposedly call into question all manner of Evil Things: capitalistic society, conventional family life, traditional sexual roles, etc. In this review, it would seem that she has indulged in a bit of subversion herself, mercilessly mocking the conventions of hip contemporary art criticism as practiced at the *Times* and elsewhere. She got it all: the unbearable pretentiousness and aesthetic obtuseness, the steady stream of political sermonizing and obsession with outré sexuality, the slavish devotion to fashion masquerading as independent critical thinking.

And we thought that parody was impossible today.

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The travels of Henry James

by Hilton Kramer

The subject was everywhere—that was the beauty, that the advantage: it was thrilling, really, to find one's self in presence of a theme to which everything directly contributed, leaving no touch of experience irrelevant. That, at any rate, so far as feeling it went; treating it, evidently, was going to be a matter of prodigious difficulty and selection—in consequence of which, indeed, there might even be a certain recklessness in the largest surrender to impressions. Clearly, however, these were not for the present—and such as they were—to be kept at bay; the hour of reckoning, obviously, would come, with more of them heaped up than would prove usable, a greater quantity of vision, possibly, than might fit into decent form: whereby, assuredly, the part of wisdom was to put in as much as possible of one's recklessness while it was fresh.

—Henry James, in *The American Scene* (1907)

James came early, and especially well-equipped, to the vocation of travel writing. To a natural disposition for keen observation his peripatetic, cosmopolitan upbringing added ample opportunity for the cultivation of those habits of comparison, analysis, and quotidian distinction that were the special mark of his genius. In turning to the two splendid volumes of the *Collected Travel Writings* that have now been published by the Library of America,[1] it is worth recalling that by the age of fifteen James had already traveled from New York City, where he was born in 1843, to England and France, then back to New York, then to Albany, then to New York again, then once more to Europe—England, France, Switzerland—and finally to Newport, Rhode Island, where, owing to his friendship with the American painter John La Farge, his introduction to the life of art may be said to have begun in earnest.

James was thus inducted into a career of serial expatriation long before the fateful decision was made to exile himself from his native country on a permanent basis. Whatever his nomadic childhood and early manhood may have cost him—the sense of rootlessness and the personal loneliness that became the defining conditions of his mature existence—his early years provided him with a perfect "school" for the acquisition of a traveler's sensibility. Feeling, as he came of age, more and more at home abroad and less and less willing to settle for the world he was born to in America, James was able to write about both with a sharpness of vision and a moral detachment that gave to his travel observations an uncommon authority and distinction. This, it should also be remembered, was recognized—first by editors, and then by readers—even in advance of the reputation that James achieved as a writer of fiction.

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1 *Henry James: Collected Travel Writings*, edited by Richard Howard. Vol. I, *Great Britain and America: English Hours, The American Scene, Other Travels*, 846 pages; Vol. II, *The Continent: A Little Tour in France, Italian Hours, Other Travels*, 845 pages. The Library of America, $35 each.

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While travel writing would always remain for James something of a sideline in his literary endeavors, at least until he produced in *The American Scene* the masterwork that can stand with the greatest of his novels, he nonetheless devoted an immense effort to it. The two volumes now published by the Library of America consist, quite apart from the useful notes and chronologies they contain, of more than fifteen hundred closely printed pages. And it was James's work as a travel writer, moreover, that brought him his first professional success. When his *Transatlantic Sketches* was published in the spring of 1875, it sold almost a thousand copies in the first three months—a success that enabled him to quit New York for Paris and thus to embark on the adventure that would shortly bring him into the company of Turgenev, Flaubert, Zola, de Maupassant, and Edmond de Goncourt.

Reading through these two volumes of the *Collected Travel Writings*, we are once again reminded of their variety as well as their intelligence and humor—a sly humor that is never vindictive or condescending but, on the contrary, an exact correlative of the experience it recounts. Thus, in his early "Swiss Notes" (1872), James sounded the note that would often become a leitmotif in his travel writings: the great differences that separated societies that took what he called "a generous view of life" from those that denied it, and the sometimes comic, and sometimes not so comic, implications that could be read in the evidence of those differences.

> The moral tone of Geneva, as I imagine it, is epigrammatically, but on the whole justly, indicated by the fact, recently related to me by a discriminating friend, that, meeting one day in the street a placard of the theatre, superscribed *Bouffes-Genevois*, he burst into irrepressible laughter. To appreciate the irony of the phrase one must have lived long enough in Geneva to suffer from the want of humor in the local atmosphere, and the absence, as well, of that aesthetic character which is begotten of a generous view of life.

Geneva was, of course, one of the places to which his restless father had taken the James family in the late 1850s, and so James had a rich stock of experience to draw upon when he returned to the city a dozen years later.

As with every other aspect of James's literary production, he was acutely conscious of what he was doing in his travel writings, and openly acknowledged their division into two general categories—a division he described with customary precision when, in 1900, he wrote a preface to the English edition of *A Little Tour in France*, which had originally been published in America in 1884.

> They are impressions, immediate, easy, and consciously limited [he wrote of the "notes" gathered in this volume]; if the written word may ever play the part of brush or pencil, they are sketches on "drawing-paper" and nothing more. From the moment the principle of selection and expression, with a tourist, is not the delight of the eyes and the play of fancy, it should be an energy in every way much larger; there is no happy mean, in other words, I hold, between the sense and the quest of the picture, and the surrender to it, and the sense and the quest of the constitution, the inner springs of the subject—springs and connections social, economic, historic.

James was supremely adept at each of these travel-writing genres, though as he got older it was inevitably "the inner springs of the subject" that came to dominate the most ambitious of these writings. Even so, he never abandoned his "quest for the picture," as he called it. I had a personal experience of what this meant when, sometime in the 1950s, I visited Richmond, Virginia, for the first time and reread the chapter on Richmond in *The American Scene* as a preparation for my visit. I found that James remained, fifty years after his own visit, a remarkably reliable guide to the look and feel of the place in which history, without quite standing still, nonetheless made the past feel oppressively close, and the isolated attempts at modernization seemed almost rude in their impertinence. As it happened, I stayed in the

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same hotel that James had, and his characterization of it did not need much in the way of amendment half a century later:

> The great modern hotel, superfluously vast, was excellent; but it enjoyed as a feature, as a "value," an uncontested priority. It was a huge well-pitched tent, the latest thing in tents, proclaiming in the desert the name of a new industry.

It is when one is able to test James's observations with first-hand experience of one's own that his humor always turns out to have been a precision instrument.

One feature of James's travel writings that usually passes unnoticed is what might be called his attention to nature, if this did not run the risk of suggesting that he was some sort of closet naturalist. James's gifts as a naturalist were, in fact, meager. Yet there is in a good deal of his travel writing a keen sense of the opportune interplay between nature and culture that gives to cosmopolitan as well as provincial places their distinctive identity. This sense of nature compared to the efforts of civilization is present in James's travel writings from the outset—in the "Swiss Notes" already cited, for example, with its mocking complaint that "the large-hewn snow-peaks of the Oberland are not the marble pinnacles of a cathedral, and the liquid sapphire and emerald of Leman and Lucerne are not firm palace-floors of lapis and verd-antique." And it is there as well in the slightly earlier essay "Lake George" (1870), where, in the midst of "the sombre forests of the North," James finds that "this brave little attempt at civilization looks as transient and accidental as the furniture of a dream." This alert sense of the geography of the countryside and the cities alike as a contest between nature and civilization remains an abiding interest even in James's encounters with the world's great metropolises. It is there in elaborate abundance in his fully orchestrated account of his return to his native New York in 1904 after an absence of many years. In the great chapter "New York Revisited" in *The American Scene*, James straightaway places the bustling city that he had once known so well in another era in both its natural setting and its relation to other cities so situated, taking immediate note of expectations that are defeated as well as the delights that are unanticipated.

> So it befell, exactly, that an element of mystery and wonder entered into the impression—the interest of trying to make out, in the absence of features of the sort usually supposed indispensable, the reason of the beauty and the joy. [New York's] is indubitably a "great" bay, a great harbour, but no one item of the romantic, or even of the picturesque, as commonly understood, contributes to its effect. The shores are low and for the most part depressingly furnished and prosaically peopled; the islands, though numerous, have not a grace to exhibit, and one thinks of the other, the real flowers of geography in this order, of Naples, of Capetown, of Sydney, of Seattle, of San Francisco, of Rio, asking how if *they* justify a reputation, New York should seem to justify one.

Still, James found that "the wide waters of New York" inspired in him a "fine exhilaration," and he was eager to explain why.

> There is the beauty of light and air, the great scale of space, and, seen far away to the west, the open gates of the Hudson, majestic in their degree, even at a distance, and announcing still nobler things. But the real appeal, unmistakably, is in that note of vehemence in the local life of which I have spoken, for it is the appeal of a particular type of dauntless power.

With this identification of "a particular type of dauntless power" as New York's primary claim on the imagination, James passes from an account of the city's natural setting to that of its moral dynamism, and it is interesting to compare his response to this overwhelming display of power to Henry Adams's at virtually the same time. This is the famous passage from Chapter 35 of *The Education of Henry Adams*:

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> The outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning. Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded, and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control. Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid. . . . A traveller in the highways of history looked out of the Club window on the turmoil of Fifth Avenue, and felt himself in Rome, under Diocletian, witnessing the anarchy, conscious of the compulsion, eager for the solution, but unable to conceive whence the next impulse was to come or how it was to act. The two-thousand-years failure of Christianity roared upward from Broadway, and no Constantine the Great was in sight.

Whether or not the world that Adams observed through his club window was as "irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid" as he thought, *he* certainly was in his response to the scene. Hence his apocalyptic view of the future. James, while also harboring doubts about a spectacle as alien to his experience as it was to Adams's, took a broader, more liberal view—a more "generous view," as it might be called—in describing the "power" that characterized New York for him at that moment.

> It is the power of the most extravagant of cities, rejoicing, as with the voice of the morning, in its might, its fortune, its unsurpassable conditions, and imparting to every object and element, to the motion and expression of every floating, hurrying, panting thing, to the throb of ferries and tugs, to the splash of waves and the play of winds and the glint of lights and the shrill of whistles and the quality and authority of breeze-borne cries—all, practically, a diffused, wasted clamour of *detonations*—something of its sharp free accent and, above all, of its sovereign sense of being "backed" and able to back. The universal *applied* passion struck me as shining unprecedentedly out of the composition; in the bigness and bravery and insolence, especially, of everything that rushed and shrieked; in the air as of a great intricate frenzied dance, half merry, half desperate, or at least half defiant, performed on the huge watery floor.

James was undeceived about the cost that such a development in civilization would entail, and there is a good deal in *The American Scene* that gives us an inventory of his doubts about the future—doubts even about the role of criticism like his own in assessing what the future might hold.

> Is not criticism wasted [he wrote] . . . just by the reason of the constant remembrance, on New York soil, that one is almost impudently cheated by any part of the show that pretends to prolong its actuality or to rest on its present basis? Since every part, however blazingly new, fails to affect us as doing more than hold the ground for something else, some conceit of the bigger dividend, that is still to come, so we may bind up the aesthetic wound, I think, quite as promptly as we feel it open. The particular ugliness, or combinations of uglinesses, is no more final than the particular felicity.

This still goes a long way toward describing the New York—and the cultural life—in which we find ourselves ninety years after James's return to the city. But unlike Adams, he remained unafraid and perfectly reasonable in the face of the new century and the new civilization he found here. It was the catastrophe of the First World War in Europe, not the expansive civilization of New York at the turn of the century, that finally reduced James to something akin to Adams's pessimism, but that was a pessimism shared by generations younger than himself.

The Library of America cannot be praised highly enough for its exemplary volumes of these *Collected Travel Writings*, which restore to us the classic works of America's greatest travel writer. Bravo!

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On the one hand, on the other: Stephen Carter tackles religion

by Roger Kimball

So I am where I like to be: difficult to pin down, hard to label.
—Stephen L. Carter, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*

Religion is, or should be, the despair of statisticians. Is contemporary America a religious nation? According to the numbers, there is none more so. Some polls tell us that over 80 percent of the population identifies itself as Christian, well over 90 percent confesses to believing in God. Nor is this a recent circumstance. Much of the country was, after all, colonized in an access of religious passion and reform. In *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville famously noted that the

> religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention. . . . I do not know whether all the Americans have a sincere faith in their religion, for who can search the human heart? But I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizen or to a party, but belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society.

And yet. And yet. What can the pollsters' numbers or Tocqueville's certainty mean? It says something, surely, that in a nation conceived largely *for the sake of* religious freedom, we today find our educated elites —many of them, anyway—insisting loudly that religious freedom means primarily freedom *from* religion. If America is sometimes described as the most religious nation on earth, it is also regularly—what: praised? castigated?—as among the most aggressively secular and materialistic.

Perhaps Tocqueville foresaw this side of America as well. Nowhere, he suggested, were the tenets of Descartes's philosophy more thoroughly applied to the ordinary business of life than in America. Tocqueville did not elaborate on this tantalizing *mot*. It seems unlikely that he had in mind Descartes's experiments in radical doubt: there was hardly leisure for them in the bustling new republic. Possibly he meant the robust individualism that distinguished America from the Old World (*ego sum* if not, exactly, *cogito ergo sum*); possibly he also had in mind Americans' intuitive embrace of pragmatism and scientific method—the method that, Descartes had promised, would make man "the master and possessor of nature." In any event, the Promethean technological project that Descartes's philosophy helped to define certainly proceeded with unparalleled vigor in America. It is one of many ironies that, despite Descartes's own pious nature, the very success of this project has often tended to eclipse God: instead of reflecting His glory, it in effect has threatened to replace Him.

Judgments about the spiritual costs and benefits of this endeavor naturally depend on the perspective of those proffering the

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judgment. But—another irony—even as the success of scientific rationalism gnawed away at traditional religious belief, it also created new spiritual vacuums: it turned out that power over nature was not at all the same thing as a meaningful place within it. A notable thing about vacuums, though: they are not particular; they demand only to be filled. This is one reason that the history of modern religious life is also partly a history of the aestheticization of religion. Alongside instances of genuine spiritual renewal—of which there are many—there are examples aplenty of counterfeit spiritual yearning. This is not to suggest that the *yearning* is counterfeit: the existential pangs and twinges do doubtless grip the heart. But it is to suggest that the spirituality with which such yearning adorns itself is often of mixed allegiance and, sometimes, of dubious integrity.

Examples? For pure aestheticization, the poet Wallace Stevens is hard to beat. When Stevens conjured, in "Flyer's Fall," a "dimension in which / We believe without belief, beyond belief," he articulated the central tension—contradiction?—that shadows so much modern "spirituality." It is less a case of the "will to believe"—in William James's memorable phrase—than of a will to make-believe. T. S. Eliot was getting at something like this when he criticized writers such as Matthew Arnold and I. A. Richards for attempting "to preserve emotions without the beliefs with which their history has been involved." To a considerable extent, the issue here is honesty: are we being true to our experience? Or are we warping experience in an effort at spiritual or intellectual masquerade? Eliot had some characteristically sober advice on this subject: "nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief, then you must just do without it." The proliferation of spiritual simulacra suggests that this is easier said than done.

A grimmer version of aestheticization is at work in the effort to press politics and social activism into service as a substitute spirituality; or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe this impulse as an attempt to poach upon the nimbus of spiritual authority in order to add luster to one's mundane political goals. There's a good deal of both in the secular millenarian fantasies of Marxism. Last spring, Hillary Rodham Clinton provided us with a striking contemporary redaction of this species of aestheticized angst. Speaking at the University of Texas, she concluded that America was living in a "spiritual vacuum," was suffering through a grave "crisis of meaning," etc. To remedy this, she prescribed a large dose of governmental intervention. "We need," she said, borrowing a phrase from the radical left-wing guru Michael Lerner,

> a new politics of meaning. . . . We need a new definition of civil society which answers the unanswerable questions posed by both the market forces and the governmental ones, as to how we can have a society that fills us up again and makes us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

If you discern a slight whiff of totalitarian sanctimoniousness in this call to arms, you are not mistaken. Consider: if I of the white hat and benign intentions practice a "politics of meaning," what sorry thing is it that you over there who disagree with me practice? A politics of nonsense?

I thought back to Mrs. Clinton's remarks about the "politics of meaning" recently when her husband presided over a prayer breakfast and urged "everybody" to read *The Culture of Disbelief*,[1] the new book about religion and politics by Stephen Carter, William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale and author of (in addition to many articles on legal subjects) *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby* (1991). This enthusiasm for Mr. Carter became a trend in liberal circles. It wasn't long afterward, for example,

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1 *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, by Stephen L. Carter; Basic Books, 328 pages, $25.

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that one found the feminist pontificatrix Anna Quindlen using her column in *The New York Times* to recommend Mr. Carter's book. Bewailing the "yawning hole in the psyche of America and Americans where our sense of common purpose, of community and connection, of hope and a spiritual satisfaction should be," Miss Quindlen followed Mr. Carter in lamenting that religion had been "trivialized" and "shoved aside in the public arena, treated like an embarrassing tic or even a character failing."

There's something to that, you know; but, gee, since when have President Clinton and Anna Quindlen been on the side of giving religion a place in "the public arena"? If you're wondering what's peculiar about this, imagine what their response would be to a book called *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* if it had been written by, say, John Cardinal O'Connor. Would the current President of the United States be urging everyone to read it? Would Anna Quindlen go all gooey over it?

In fact, this is one important theme of Stephen Carter's book. Although it discusses the First Amendment and the complex legal status of religion in the United States, *The Culture of Disbelief*, as Mr. Carter points out in his first chapter, is really "not about law, but about attitudes—the attitude that we as a political society hold toward religion." In brief, that attitude may be characterized as one of hostile indifference. Mr. Carter hopes to change that, "to discover whether there might be a way to preserve the separation of church and state without trivializing faith as we do today." A practicing member of the Episcopal Church and himself a political liberal (he is, for example, a friend and staunch supporter of Anita Hill), Mr. Carter is disturbed at the widespread liberal tendency to regard any public articulation of religious scruples as a symptom of reaction and right-wing political sympathies. Not that he doesn't engage in a good deal of hand-wringing about "the sort of liberal-bashing that often characterizes the rhetoric of the religious right" himself. Indeed, it tells us a lot that the phrase that occurs most frequently in *The Culture of Disbelief* is "the 1992 Republican Convention"; it is not used as a term of endearment. Nevertheless, despite Mr. Carter's highly developed animus toward all things Republican, he worries that "many political leaders, commentators, scholars, and voters are coming to view any religious element in public moral discourse as of a tool of the radical right for reshaping American politics."

Mr. Carter's point is that in the world according to liberal orthodoxy, religion is OK only so long as it is a purely private matter. As soon as it takes its moral convictions seriously—i.e., as soon as it presumes to see people actually live by those convictions rather than merely mouth them—religion supposedly becomes a threat to the polity and the constitutional guarantee of "the separation of church and state." It's worth thinking about this for a moment.

Today, we routinely assume that the "wall of separation" between church and state (the metaphor comes from Roger Williams) was erected to protect society from the possible depredations of religion. In fact, it seems that something close to the reverse was the case. What those first bits of the First Amendment actually say, remember, is that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." *Congress*, mind you. In the beginning, individual states were free to promulgate particular religions; some did. Whether or not this was a good thing in a country dedicated to pluralistic democracy is perhaps arguable. But it is clear that it was religion, not the state, that the Founders were chiefly concerned to safeguard with these two clauses. As Mr. Carter argues, "the metaphorical separation of church and state originated in an effort to protect religion from the state, not the state from religion."

This is pretty much forgotten today, with the result that religion is accorded only the most tenuous official recognition in public life. (Legal opinions on the subject regularly warn against an "excessive entanglement

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with religion.") But by banishing religion from the public square, Mr. Carter warns, the cultural elite has trivialized religion, reducing it to little more than a "hobby." In this sense, he says, we have fostered a political and legal culture that encourages the religiously faithful to act "as though their faith does not matter to them." Thus it is that despite many signs of religious revival in American society, religious belief tends to be treated as something "arbitrary and unimportant." "There are, we are taught by our opinion leaders, religious matters and important matters, and disaster arises when we confuse the two." One curious consequence of this assumption is the political demonization of religion. The message is, Mr. Carter writes, that "people who take their religion seriously, who rely on their understanding of God for motive force in their public and political personalities—well, they're scary people." It is one of his central ambitions in this book to reverse this prejudice and reclaim religion for liberalism.

Despite the gushing support that President Clinton, Anna Quindlen, and others have shown for Mr. Carter's book, this will be uphill work. The problem is that for many liberal critics, religion *should* be relegated to the margins of public life—if not, indeed, dispensed with altogether. Mr. Carter is no doubt correct that "lots of public religion is not the same as taking religion seriously." But for some commentators, religion is still far too powerful a presence in public life: the *pro forma* prayers that open Congress, the inscription "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency: are these not dangerous "impositions" of belief? In fact, official expressions of religious sentiment in public life these days rarely have deeper significance than the "God bless you!" uttered in response to a sneeze. In the end, it's unclear whether the President and Miss Quindlen really mean anything more: they want you to "feel good" about religion—within, that is, the limits prescribed by the officially mandated irrelevance of religion.

It was not always this way. As recently as the early 1960s, the civil-rights movement drew prominently on the moral resources of religion to further its aims. At that time, the reaction by the liberal establishment to religion was rather different. Mr. Carter says in one place that "our culture cannot be so hypocritical in its protection of religious freedom as to endorse the intervention of the church against the state only in pursuit of expressly liberal ends." In response to which one is tempted to ask, Want to bet? Think back to the confirmation hearings for Judge Robert Bork. The list of things for which the judge, a Roman Catholic, was attacked by liberal pundits was long and, occasionally, revealing. Among much else, he was savaged for subscribing to the idea that there is such a thing as natural law—to the idea, that is, that morality is not an arbitrary human "construction" (as we are routinely assured today) but, on the contrary, that it has its foundation in the divine order of nature. Liberal commentators found this conviction both ridiculous and frightening—ridiculous, for how could anyone actually believe in a divine order of nature today? Frightening, because anyone with such outlandish beliefs might well seek to "impose" them on an unwilling populace. Curiously, though, when the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., espoused *his* belief in natural law—"A just law," King insisted, "is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God"—the liberal establishment barely noticed, so busy were they cheering.

Again, when Cardinal O'Connor recently warned that Catholic politicians who supported abortion rights were "at risk of excommunication," a writer in *Vanity Fair* accused him of being a "fanatic," a "religious zealot unquestioningly committed to a rigid set of beliefs." (Read: the Cardinal had the effrontery to abide by his Church's teaching on a fundamental moral issue.) But when several important segregationists actually *were* excommunicated in the early 1960s for refusing to follow the Church's teaching that racism is wrong, there were no denunciations from the media, no accusations that the bishops were fanatics and religious zealots. The truth is that in religion, as in

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other areas of cultural life, certification by the liberal media is strictly dependent upon passing certain political tests. Religion is dandy so long as it is a pious adjunct to the liberal agenda: otherwise it is at best irrelevant, at worst an irrational intrusion of "right-wing" ideas. Mr. Carter comes close to admitting this when he observes that "there is much depressing evidence that the religious voice is required to stay out of the public square only when it is pressed in a conservative cause."

About all this, Mr. Carter is a breath of fresh air. It should be said, too, that he writes clearly and intelligently about a number of related issues. He has, for example, some penetrating things to say about the "Faustian bargain" that churches make when they accept special tax status. Quoting Chief Justice John Marshall's famous observation that "the power to tax involves the power to destroy," he adds the important codicil that "the power to grant tax relief also involves the power to destroy." By accepting state largess in the form of tax-exempt status, churches inevitably make themselves beholden to the state.

It would be pleasant to report that Mr. Carter is equally convincing when arguing his own case for religion. *The Culture of Disbelief* is often illuminating about the ways that religion is trivialized in contemporary American society. Unfortunately, to a large extent it is also an example of that trivialization. Mr. Carter says he wants to preserve (or reaffirm) the "autonomy" of religion and liberate "serious" religious devotion and participation in public debate from its identification with conservative ideology. But although he offers various qualifications and caveats, essentially he attempts to do these things by assimilating religion to his own liberal political and social agenda. The result is not the emancipation but the further denaturing of religion.

Mr. Carter talks a great deal about the moral authority of religion. But his own liberal convictions make it difficult if not impossible for him to take that authority seriously whenever it conflicts with his politics. This is evident in the positions he takes on the standard repertoire of policy issues involving religion. With one or two exceptions, it is the straight liberal menu. Thus while Mr. Carter reluctantly supports the right of the Ancient Order of Hibernians to exclude a contingent of homosexuals from their St. Patrick's Day Parade—he disagrees with the Catholic proscription of homosexuality but recognizes the Church's right to propagate its own moral teachings—on nearly every other issue his position is liberal boilerplate. He's against school prayer (it "in effect coerces religious adherence" from "impressionable children"), but thinks that a moment of silence is acceptable; he's for abortion, *even if the fetus is regarded as a human being.* (This position he describes as being "moderately pro-choice"; what would being "adamantly pro-choice" entail? Mandatory abortion?) He is against capital punishment, favors the ordination of women, and worries a great deal about the rights of marginal religious groups: e.g., is it fair that members of the Native American Church who work for the government should be prosecuted for using peyote when the drug is central to their religious practice?

Perhaps even more revealing than Mr. Carter's positions on these issues, however, are some of the asides that he offers along the way. About the ordination of women, for example, he speaks of Christians (like himself, presumably) who "deny that one can fully experience God in a world in which women are not allowed to answer the call to priesthood." But think about it: was the world less than "fully experienced" until that marvelous day a few years ago when the Episcopal church opened the ranks of its clergy to women? Again: Mr. Carter and his wife send their children to a religious school where group prayer is part of the daily diet. The Carters think this is a good thing "but"—enter the most sacrosanct of liberal shibboleths—"we would never impose that preference on anybody else." Whatever one thinks about the issue of school prayer (is it really as "coercive" a practice as Mr. Carter

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supposes?), is it not curious that the author of a book aiming to combat the trivialization of religion should continually retreat to this prime liberal anxiety about "imposing values" on others? Query: *Can* religion be more than a private—indeed, a trivial—pursuit if it does not seek to see its moral vision realized in the world—if it does not, that is to say, seek to "impose" its "values"?

Early on in his book, Mr. Carter offers a simple explanation for why the liberal establishment has become so hostile to the public display of religion: "What has happened can be captured in one word: abortion." It was the battle over abortion, he argues, that polarized the debate on religion, pushing conservatives toward greater activism and liberals toward uneasy dismissal. In fact, though, the liberal rejection of religion was already essentially completed by the time *Roe v. Wade* was decided in 1973. In one case after the next, the courts had been chipping away at the public authority of religion since at least the early 1960s, banning school prayer, prohibiting public funding of textbooks in religious schools, etc. What happened to change liberal attitudes about religion can indeed be summed up briefly; but the operative word is not "abortion" but the "Sixties." It was the emancipationist ideology of the 1960s that turned the tide against religion, substituting hedonistic self-centeredness for the recognition of transcendent moral authority. The sudden prominence of abortion on the liberal agenda at this time was only a symptom; those who were once castigated as "abortionists" now became respected members of the medical profession and (a grisly freak of language) the deliberate killing of fetuses was now regarded as an exercise of "reproductive rights" guaranteed by a putative "right" to privacy.

In this context, it is significant that Mr. Carter several times admiringly quotes and alludes to the liberal theologian David Tracy's contention that "religions are at their best when they are forms of resistance." Again, the aroma of Sixties activism is no accident. For Mr. Carter, it seems, religion escapes triviality chiefly by committing its moral authority to particular (liberal) political causes: "properly understood," he tells us, religion "*is* a very subversive force." The place of religion in *binding* communities (as the etymology of the word "religion" suggests), affirming values, celebrating unity is lost in this scenario of pious rebellion. Moreover, it is not at all clear what Mr. Carter thinks about the *inside* of religious life: the metaphysical, existential, theological dimension of religious teaching—the dimension that, until recently, was thought to be primary. The few hints that he drops are not encouraging. In one place, for example, Mr. Carter remarks that religion is an "alien" way of knowing "in a political and legal culture in which reason supposedly rules." In other words, religion is not quite up to snuff when it comes to being rational—a proposition that would have come as a surprise to hard-headed theologians from Augustine to Aquinas to (in our own day) Karl Rahner.

In many respects, *The Culture of Disbelief* leaves one with the same feelings that Mr. Carter's earlier book, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, did. Both make a great show of critical independence, but in the end both wind up affirming the standard liberal line in all essentials. In his earlier book, Mr. Carter began by sounding some dissenting notes about affirmative action: perhaps, he said, he belonged to the last generation of blacks that would enter the professional world courtesy of affirmative action. This, he thought, betokened progress. But by the end of his book he endorses the continuance of affirmative action because it supposedly assures greater "diversity" (the other great liberal shibboleth that complements the liberal fear of "imposing" values). Similarly, in *The Culture of Disbelief* Mr. Carter raises many telling arguments against the trivialization of religion. He then embraces a view of religion that all but assures its perpetuation. It is a sad irony that this compassionate book, which was intended to reawaken genuine religious engagement, should itself turn out to be an obstacle to achieving that goal.

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Seneca & European tragedy

by Dana Gioia

In 1543 Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio, the influential Italian playwright, critic, and writer of *novelle* (from whom Shakespeare borrowed the plots of *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*), judiciously summarized the Renaissance view of Seneca's dramas: "In almost all his tragedies he surpassed (in as far as I can judge) all the Greeks who ever wrote—in wisdom, in gravity, in decorum, in majesty, and in memorable aphorism."

Renaissance criticism often employs vague and platitudinous language, but Cinthio's terms of praise are refreshingly exact. He asserts Seneca's pre-eminence among classical tragedians in five specific areas—*wisdom* (the moral truth and importance of what is presented), *gravity* (the integrity of tragic tone and vision), *decorum* (the appropriate consistency of language, character, action, and idea), *majesty* (the ability to create the imposing and sublime), and *memorable aphorism* (Cinthio's Italian term is *sentenze* in the Elizabethan sense of *sentences*—insightful and quotable maxims). Needless to say, none of Cinthio's evaluative categories enjoys much critical currency today (though whether their absence represents our age's gain remains an open question). Indeed Cinthio himself has been largely forgotten except by Renaissance scholars. And yet his perspective on Seneca remains illuminating because he was no academic antiquarian. He was a visionary artist-intellectual engaged in an imaginative enterprise beyond the scope and ambition of most writers—to re-create one of the central European literary genres, tragic theater, after a hiatus of nearly fifteen hundred years. Though Cinthio and his Italian contemporaries failed to compose enduring masterpieces, they decisively shaped the renascence of European tragedy that culminated in Shakespeare, Corneille, and Racine, a tradition they consciously grounded in Seneca.

Today Cinthio's high opinion appears perverse and ill-informed. Seneca the tragedian is a forgotten author. The plays are never performed, rarely discussed, and hardly read, except by specialists. To ascertain how low Seneca now stands in critical esteem requires no great scholarly effort. A cursory examination of a few dozen histories of theater or comprehensive dramatic anthologies will reveal the little there is to know. If Seneca is mentioned at all in these general surveys, he is never presented as an author whose plays have enduring intrinsic worth. He usually appears in a few sentences about his historical influence on Renaissance tragedy. Among the many critical volumes that discuss the history or theory of tragedy, I have yet to find one that affords Seneca serious, extended coverage. Nor have I found a general anthology of drama that reprints one of Seneca's tragedies. Even collections of classical drama or poetry rarely represent him. In part Seneca's decline reflects the broader devaluation of Roman literature over the last two centuries, but contemporary critics and scholars have seemed

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especially eager to jettison him wholesale from the classical canon. Bernard Knox's *Norton Book of Classical Literature* (1993), for example, finds no space in its 866 pages for a single line of Seneca's verse or prose. (Knox also excludes Seneca's eminent fellow Iberians, Martial and Lucan—crypto-Hispanaphobia?) Although Seneca has had some champions among modern classicists—notably John Fitch, Moses Hadas, and Frederick Ahl—he remains a marginal figure, even among specialists. Elsewhere Seneca *tragicus* is less a dramatist than a footnote.

On those rare occasions when Seneca's plays are discussed outside of the classics department, one finds a standard set of indictments. Herbert J. Muller's *The Spirit of Tragedy* (1956) presents the conventional view of his dramatic *oeuvre*: "Almost all readers today are struck by how crude his drama is, and how invincibly abominable his taste. It is hard to understand why for centuries Western critics and poets had so high an admiration of Seneca, installing his plays among the classics."

Muller's study, which is exceptional in affording Seneca a few pages (and unique in devoting an entire paragraph to discussing an actual text, the *Oedipus*), presents the material in a chapter on "Greek Tragedy" under the subtitle "Epilogue: The Decline to Seneca." Subtitle tells all. The Roman drama, Muller asserts, is "an unconscious caricature of Greek tragedy." Muller gets so excited in condemning Seneca that the complaints come out pell-mell. If one liberally paraphrases and organizes his objections, we can list the standard legal charges leveled against the ancient Iberian:

1. *Seneca is derivative and decadent*: He borrows the formal conventions of Greek tragedy without capturing its essential spirit. His use of devices like the chorus no longer has dramatic meaning.
2. *Seneca is rhetorical rather than dramatic*: His plays are full of oratorical declamation and aphoristic repartee rather than the economic unfolding of dramatic action. His verse is marred, to quote another critic, by "aphoristic obscurities and far-fetched allusions."
3. *Seneca's sensibility is lurid and violent*. Seneca's chief innovation on his Greek models was to make them more graphic in their violence. Killings occur onstage. Characters describe gruesome offstage events in dramatic set pieces.
4. *Seneca is technically incompetent as a dramatist*: His plays lack "economy, purity, symmetry, appropriateness of any sort." He is "indifferent to form." The plays are shapeless displays of rhetoric and terror.
5. *Seneca's vision is ultimately not tragic, just horrifying*: Seneca (and, according to Muller, all Romans) lacked "a tragic sense of life." There is no catharsis in Seneca, no pity and awe—just horror.

Muller's charges may sound excessive to anyone familiar with Seneca's long-standing (if now long-vanished) popularity and influence on European literature. But to the average student of literature, the condemnation probably comes as good news. As David Slavitt has remarked, "We live in a busy time with many distractions and pressures, and it is a relief to be told that we may skip these plays." Muller's charges, moreover, merely echo the Romantic assessment of Seneca. In his lectures on drama, August Wilhelm von Schlegel declared Seneca's tragedies "beyond all description bombastic and frigid, utterly devoid of nature in character and action, full of the most revolting violations of propriety." Hegel referred to them as "dramatic failures." Nietzsche, a classicist by training, mentioned them not at all in his many discussions of tragedy. By the beginning of the twentieth century Seneca had ceased to exist for both critics and readers as a living presence in the tradition of European tragedy. Meanwhile for classical scholars he became more interesting as a set of textual problems to unravel than as an artist deserving advocacy. Discriminating literary critics were properly concerned, to use George Steiner's terms from *The Death of Tragedy*, with "the genius of Greek tragedy" and not "its inferior Latin version."

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Giraldi Cinthio was not alone in admiring Seneca. For over fifteen hundred years no classical author except Virgil enjoyed more esteem. Along with Cicero, Horace, and Ovid, Seneca was an indispensable author. The early Church Fathers, eager to save the best classical literature, found him greatly to their liking largely for the same reasons Cinthio celebrated a millennium later—his moral seriousness, decorous style, imaginative sweep, and exceptionally quotable *sententiae*. The Iberian's Stoic philosophy neatly corresponded to the austere puritanism of early Christianity. Stern Tertullian affectionately called him "our Seneca." St. Jerome went even further. He suggested that Seneca deserved sainthood—an unusual honor, to say the least, for the pagan who had tutored the Emperor Nero. Seneca's work, especially his essays and epistles, became part of medieval Catholic culture.

As long as Latin remained the central language in European learning, Seneca occupied an eminent position in literature. Erasmus produced the first critical edition of his work. Calvin's first publication was a commentary on *De Clementia*. Montaigne listed Seneca and Plutarch as his favorite reading, and he quotes the Iberian more than any author except Plato. Scaliger preferred him to Euripides. Dante and Chaucer praised his skillful rhetoric and stoic morality. In an epistle, Petrarch declared him an ideal spiritual companion. Queen Elizabeth I admired his "wholesome advisings." Meanwhile her subject Ben Jonson inscribed Seneca's motto "tanquam explorator" ("as an explorer") on the title page of his books. Jonson was not the only explorer inspired by the philosopher poet. In the margins of the family copy of Seneca's tragedies Christopher Columbus's son Ferdinand wrote that his father had fulfilled the poet's prophesy that a later age would find a land beyond Thule, the boundary of the Roman known world.

If the Middle Ages prized Seneca the philosopher, the Renaissance found transforming inspiration in the dramatist. Seneca stands—without any serious rival—as the most important influence on Renaissance tragedy, not only in English but also in Italian, French, and Spanish. He was, first of all, the only classical tragedian whom most writers could savor in the original. The early Renaissance barely knew Greek literature and even then mainly in Latin translation. Seneca, however, was avidly studied and performed in grammar schools, seminaries, legal academies, and universities. Seneca's stoic tragedies, full of stirring rhetoric and striking *sententiae,* were a schoolmaster's dream (just as their violent plots and noble sentiments were surely a schoolboy's delight). At the Rotherham School near Sheffield, weekly lessons in Shakespeare's time consisted of two afternoons of Horace and two afternoons of Seneca's tragedies, which the students translated into English. There was no more engrossing way to perfect a student's Latin than by reading, memorizing, and reciting the plays of Seneca, Plautus, and Terence. Latin drama also served a ceremonial and financial function; schools presented plays as public entertainments for their patrons. Seneca was performed at the Inns of Court, Oxford, and Cambridge. Continental Jesuit schools organized performances to attract and recruit young intellectuals to their order.

In his native Spain, Seneca (and Cinthio's Senecan adaptations) became the classical models with which dramatists like Juan de la Cueva and Christobál de Virtués tried to discipline the vital but unruly popular theater. If the Iberian's example of intensifying drama through classical form and compression proved only intermittently influential, the stunning sensationalism of his plots made a lasting impression. His latter-day countrymen outdid him in devising spectacular revenges, horrifying ghosts, inspiring declamations, and lurid pageants of seduction, rape, incest, and murder. Miguel de Cervantes displayed more restraint in his classical tragedy, *El Cerco de Numancia* ("The Siege of Numantia," *c.* 1580), but he, too, used Seneca as a model.

Less rooted in the economics of popular

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theater than the Spanish stage, French drama quickly assimilated the formal principles of classical tragedy. The French knew some Greek tragedy from the Latin translations of Erasmus and others, but in France, too, Seneca provided the most accessible model. French theater observed the classical unities of time, place, and action as well as the restrictions against comedy and low diction longer than any other tradition. For better and worse, Seneca remained a model for French tragedy from early plays like La Péruse's *Médée* (1553), a direct adaptation of Seneca's *Medea*, to neoclassical masterpieces like Pierre Corneille's *Médée* (1635) and Jean Racine's *Andromaque* (1667) and *Phèdre* (1677). As George Saintsbury observed, Seneca's influence pervaded French tragic theater, "from Jodelle, through Garnier and Montchrestien and even Hardy, through Corneille and Racine and Voltaire, leaving his traces even on Victor Hugo."

The sheer volume of Renaissance translations, adaptations, and imitations attests to Seneca's pre-eminent popularity. He was the first classical poet to be translated *in toto* into English. The Jesuit Jasper Heywood, who called Seneca "the flowre of all writers," published his free adaptation of *Troas* in 1559, followed by increasingly more faithful versions of *Thyestes* (1560) and *Hercules Furens* (1561). Other eager Elizabethan translators soon followed. By 1581 Thomas Newton was able to collect Seneca's *Tenne Tragedies* in one volume. (At that time only one Greek tragedy was available in English, a 1566 version of Euripides' *Phoenissae* translated from an Italian Senecan adaptation and retitled *Jocasta*; it remained the only Greek translation until the next century.) Seneca's plays became the model for both the traditions of English tragedy—the courtly dramas of Samuel Daniel and Fulke Greville, sponsored by the learned Countess of Pembroke, and the popular theater of Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe. *Gorboduc* (1562), the first blank-verse tragedy, imitated Seneca, but it was Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (*c.* 1585) that first made the Senecan conventions come alive in English.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of Seneca on Elizabethan tragedy. English dramatists absorbed him from every side—directly from the Latin, from French and Italian adaptations, and from Newton's popular *Tenne Tragedies*. Thomas Nash, like most learned Elizabethans, deplored writers who could not read the Latin classics in the original and "feed on nought but the crummes that fal from the translators trencher," but in 1589 even he recognized the inspirational impact these translations had on his contemporaries: ". . . yet English *Seneca* read by candle light yeeldes manie good sentences . . . and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, he will affoord you whole *Hamlets*, I should say handfulls of tragical speeches."

Seneca provided the formal pattern for Elizabethan tragedy. He gave Tudor playwrights their five-act structure to frame the dramatic action with a beginning, middle, and end (rather than the episodic form of most medieval drama). He introduced a cast of helpful secondary characters to keep the narrative moving: the messenger to report important (and usually violent) offstage events; the female confidante to elicit private thoughts from the heroine; the loyal friend or servant to listen to and advise the hero; as well as a decidedly un-Athenian version of a chorus that moralizes on events but never participates in them. Seneca also introduced the catalyzing figure of the ghost who returns from death to provoke revenge. The classical stature of Seneca's tragedies also gave the Elizabethans permission to use violent and sensational plots featuring murder, suicide, adultery, incest, trickery, insanity, and vengeance. All of these attributes came together in the most influential Seneca contribution to English drama—the revenge tragedy. Modeled mostly on Seneca's *Thyestes*, these "tragedies of blood" combined violence, intrigue, and constant psychological tension. Is it any wonder they became the most popular genre of the Elizabethan stage? Senecan revenge tragedy gave shape not only to Kyd's crowd-pleasing *Spanish Tragedy* and Tourneur's adorably lurid *Re-*

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venger's Tragedy but also to Shakespeare's innovative psychological drama, *Hamlet*.

Seneca's other contribution to English tragedy was magnificent language. He showed playwrights the lofty alternatives to the drab verse of earlier drama. In style as in subject matter, Seneca is the poet of extremes. His verse is never better than when at its most expansive or its most concise. His extended, emotional speeches in which the language and the passions build to explosive levels dazzled the word-drunk Elizabethans. If Seneca's dramatic orations with their sonorous allusions, musical syntax, and dizzy rhetorical turns encouraged hurricanes of theatrical bombast, they also demonstrated how mixing the techniques of poetry and oratory could create dramatic verse of powerful eloquence. To understand how Seneca's great speeches sound in Latin, an English-speaker need go no further than Marlowe, who patterned his dramatic verse after Seneca's high tragic style:

> If all the pens that ever poets held
> Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,
> And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,
> Their minds, and muses on admired themes;
> If all the heavenly quintessence they still
> From their immortal flowers of poesy,
> Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
> The highest reaches of a human wit;
> If these had made one poem's period,
> And all combined in beauty's worthiness,
> Yet should there hover in their restless heads
> One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
> Which into words no virtue can digest.

This passage from *Tamburlaine the Great* displays the lush, declamatory, hyperbolic language of Senecan drama. The characters in tragedy do not lead quotidian lives. They suffer the extremities of ambition, lust, horror, pain, and remorse, and they require speech capable of carrying their extraordinary burdens. The syntax is often overtly rhetorical, as when Marlowe piles one hypothetical phrase on another, and the phrasing is often pointed, as in the calculated and balanced alliterations in key lines, but the total effect is poetic.

Renaissance playwrights also learned the theatrical impact of brevity from Seneca. Ingenious one-liners are not a conspicuous feature of folk drama; striking aphorism, however, is the trademark of Seneca's theatrical language. Lapidary *sententiae* end major speeches, announce turning points in soliloquies, and add edge to important conversations. Seneca also handled the traditional Greek technique of *stichomythia* (verse dialogue in which characters trade one-line repartees) with unsurpassed brilliance. Seneca has had many detractors, but no one has ever questioned his genius for aphorism.

It is no accident that the *sententia* is a characteristic Roman form. Latin is the ideal medium for epigram. Since it is an inflected language where the endings of words signal their grammatical functions, most prepositions and auxiliary verbs are unnecessary. It also lacks articles. Consequently, Latin can say something in about half the words required in English. Word order is also almost entirely flexible, so a poet can freely arrange the language to achieve the maximum musical and semantic effect.

Seneca's fellow Iberian Martial became the greatest epigrammatic poet in European literature, but Seneca had little interest in the epigram as an independent literary form. In both his verse and prose he used it as a means of punctuating and intensifying longer works. His prose is celebrated for its quotable maxims:

> There is no great genius without some touch of madness.

> It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor.

> The best ideas are common property.

> What nature requires is obtainable, and within easy reach. It's for the superfluous we sweat.

His verse epigrams, however, show even greater compression. Seneca carefully match-

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es his syntax to his meter, making the aphoristic sentence fit exactly into a single line of verse (a trick far less common in Latin poetry than an English-speaker would imagine). His pointed lines have the brevity, clarity, balance, and polish characteristic of the form.

Curae leves locuntur, ingentes stupent.
[Light griefs speak easily, the great ones are struck dumb.]

Prima quae vitam dedit hora, carpit.
[The first hour that gave life also began to take it away.]

Per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter.
[The safe journey through crimes is always by more crimes.]

The careful shaping and compression of speech into formal patterns exercised immense influence on European dramatic poets. In England, both Seneca's expansive and epigrammatic styles helped determine the development of blank verse. In his 1927 essay "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," which remains the most profound modern defense of the tragedian (and the last time a major English-language writer discussed Seneca at any length), Eliot observed: "The art of dramatic language . . . is as near to oratory as to ordinary speech or to other poetry. If the Elizabethans distorted and travestied Seneca in some ways . . . they also learned from him the essentials of declaimed verse."

Ironically, it was only in Italy, where the Senecan revival had begun, that no tragic theater emerged comparable to the traditions of England, France, and Spain. Today the influential Italian playwrights of the mid-sixteenth century like Cinthio and Ludovico Dolce survive mainly as figures of literary history. The failure of Renaissance Italy to develop a national theater has fascinated critics, and many complex theories have been offered in explanation. Surely near the heart of the problem, however, lurks Seneca.

Italian tragedy was the creation of self-conscious intellectuals cut off from a viable tradition of popular theater. They tried to re-create classical tragedy for a sophisticated audience of nobles, courtiers, and intelligentsia. Choosing Seneca as a model, however, they began to exploit the stylized and lyric elements of drama at the expense of its narrative and realistic features. From the beginning Cinthio and Dolce used *intermedi* (music, madrigals, and choruses performed between the acts). Within fifty years Italian artists had developed the ritual and lyric potentials of the Senecan aesthetic to their logical end—opera. In 1597 the first opera, *Dafne*, was produced by three members of the Florentine *camerata*, a coterie of poets, musicians, aristocrats, and intellectuals. By 1607, when Claudio Monteverdi staged his *Orfeo*, opera had found its first genius. His final work, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* ("The Coronation of Poppea," 1642), became opera's first incontestable masterpiece. Not coincidentally it tells the same story as the pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia*, and Seneca himself is one of the major characters. If opera eventually became Italy's true tragic theater, the new art form owed as much to Seneca as to its professed model, Greek tragedy. Indeed, the dark masterpieces of Italian Romantic lyric tragedy by Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi not only share a common dramatic aesthetic with Seneca, they also provide the best analogy for a modern audience as to how Roman tragedy achieves its emotional effects. Three centuries after Cinthio's death his dream of re-creating the grave majesty of Seneca's tragedies had become a reality—not in the theaters of Italy but in its opera houses.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born in 4 B.C. in the southern Spanish city of Cordova, into a family of equestrian rank, immense wealth, and intellectual distinction. His father, Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Elder (often known as Seneca the Rhetorician to distinguish him from his more famous son), was an influential author in his own right. He wrote a lost history of Rome, but his

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most celebrated works were two treatises on rhetoric, *Controversiae* ("Debates") in ten books and *Suasoriae* ("Persuasive Arguments") in two books, both of which survive in fragmentary form. It is hard for contemporary readers to understand the cultural importance of these books. Rhetoric was the basis of Roman education. Boys preparing for either public or intellectual life pursued a curriculum of rhetorical study, which included logic, moral philosophy, literature, memory training, oratory, and expository writing. A famous rhetorician like Seneca the Elder, therefore, commanded the sort of intellectual and social authority in Rome that today we might associate with a millionaire president of an Ivy League university who had also won the Nobel Prize in Economics.

Each of Seneca the Elder's children was in some way remarkable. His oldest son, Annaeus Novatus, became proconsul of Achaia, the Roman governor of Southern Greece. A sensible but aloof man, he was careful to stay out of local religious squabbles. He appears under his adopted name, Junius Gallio, in The Acts of the Apostles (18:12-16) when Athenian Jews charged St. Paul with blasphemy. The youngest son, Annaeus Mela, concentrated his energy on growing the considerable family fortune. He eventually became the agent who managed much of Nero's business. More important, Mela raised a son named Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, whom posterity remembers as Lucan, Rome's last great epic poet. His historical poem *De Bello Civili* ("On the Civil War"), sometimes called *Pharsalia*, chronicled the war between Caesar and Pompey. His youthful fame made Nero, who fancied himself Rome's greatest poet, actor, musician, and charioteer, so wildly jealous that the emperor forbade Lucan from reciting or publishing his poems. Our Latinless age no longer reads Lucan, but his former stature among European poets is demonstrated by Dante. In Canto IV of the *Inferno*, Virgil's ghost is met in Limbo by the shades of four great poets—Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan—who, with Virgil, constitute Dante's nominees for the greatest poets of antiquity. Seneca the Elder, Seneca the Younger, and Lucan represent an extraordinary constellation of talent. Has any other family produced three such distinguished writers in three successive generations? The achievement seems unique. There was little chance for a fourth generation. In A.D. 65 all three brothers and the twenty-six-year-old Lucan died by suicide in the aftermath of Piso's failed conspiracy against Nero's life.

The accomplishments of Seneca the Elder's middle son, Lucius Annaeus, however, take precedence in this distinguished clan. He became a major figure in drama, philosophy, and politics, amassing one of the greatest fortunes in the Roman world. As was the custom in his family, Seneca was brought to Rome as an infant. He studied Stoic and Pythagorean philosophy. Despite the slurs on his character by partisan contemporaries, Seneca appears to have had a sober, disciplined, and introspective character linked with a pragmatic and politic mind. Drawn to ideological purism, he had too much common sense and sociability to become an extremist. One incident from Seneca's youth illustrates the two sides of his character. Excited by Pythagoreanism, Seneca became a strict vegetarian. When the elder Seneca discovered his son's new enthusiasm, he warned him of the liabilities in public life of becoming known as an eccentric. His son accepted the advice.

Like many writers, Seneca was a sickly youth. At one point his health was so bad he considered suicide but held back out of consideration for his aged father. The young Seneca traveled for his health to Egypt, where his aunt was married to the Prefect. When he returned to Rome, he worked with conspicuous success in several areas—politics, law, teaching, and literature. First he gained the minor office of *quaestor* and then became *tribunis plebis* (public advocate) on his way to a career in the Senate. He grew famous for his persuasive addresses in the Senate and his sharp, memorable writing. The Greek historian Dio Cassius attests that Caligula envied Seneca's eloquence and

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planned to execute him, but his advisors assured the emperor that the philosopher would soon die of consumption. Learning of Caligula's designs, Seneca took the hint and retired from public life. (No one knows when Seneca wrote most of his plays and philosophical treatises, but one assumes that like many out-of-power politicians, this active man did not waste his recurrent periods of enforced leisure.)

After the demented Caligula died at the hands of the Praetorian guard in A.D. 41, the moderate but erratic Claudius assumed the throne. By now the Republican institutions of pre-imperial Rome had been mostly corrupted or destroyed under the first four Caesars. Assassination, coerced suicide, and exile had decimated the patrician class. Rome was the administrative and financial center for a vast empire of sixty million souls where immense fortunes and sumptuous luxuries were available to those sufficiently clever, aggressive, or ruthless. In this venal and unstable environment, Seneca returned to public life.

Seneca's re-entry into politics was short and disastrous. Within the year he somehow became involved in the vicious power struggles of the Claudian house. Accused of adultery with a member of the royal family, he was exiled to mountainous and lawless Corsica. During his hard, eight-year exile, Seneca lost both wife and son. He filled the years of grief and isolation, however, by writing some of his most influential philosophical works—two of his three surviving "consolations" (eloquent Stoic essays on death and bereavement) and probably *De Ira* ("On Anger"), a treatise on controlling the emotions.

Today few people read these erstwhile classics. They have little to offer the academic student of philosophy. Although early Stoics were rigidly systematic, Seneca is mostly unconcerned with philosophical systems. He belongs to that antiquated and discredited trade called moral philosophy. Seneca the philosopher is nothing more or less than a brilliant, candid, reflective man obsessed with the question of how the average thinking person leads a good and happy life in the face of pain, uncertainty, and death. His vision of philosophy is relentlessly practical. He knew that few people care about philosophical inquiry in the abstract. For Seneca, philosophy meant trying to live correctly and honestly by means of reason. To make matters worse among contemporary philosophers, Seneca's prose style is concise, lucid, and memorable. In the Middle Ages whole anthologies were devoted to *sententiae* from Seneca's lapidary Latin. Elizabethan schoolboys memorized his maxims. A glove-maker's son from Stratford, for instance, remembered Seneca's pithy "Tanta stultitia mortalium est" and translated it quite literally as "what fools these mortals be."

In A.D. 48 Messalina outraged Rome by bigamously marrying her lover. The uxorious Claudius could not bring himself to punish Messalina, but his advisors sent the Praetorian guard to kill her. Claudius heard the news at table and went on with his meal. The compliant emperor was soon pushed into an incestuous marriage with his niece, the crafty, iron-willed Agrippina. Foremost among the new empress's ambitions was that her son, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, would be designated heir to the throne. When Claudius finally adopted him in A.D. 50, the boy assumed the old Claudian family name by which he is remembered—Nero. Agrippina needed a capable mentor for her talented son. She also wanted to create public good will for the boy. She successfully maneuvered to recall the widely respected Seneca from Corsica to serve as twelve-year-old Nero's private tutor.

Returning to Rome, Seneca found himself at the center of political power. For the next thirteen years he would be one of the most powerful men in the empire. Meanwhile Agrippina worked to secure her son the throne. In A.D. 54 Agrippina fed Claudius poisoned mushrooms. He did not die at once, so his wife administered a second dose, possibly, Suetonius reports, by means of an enema. Claudius's popular son, Britannicus, was kept in the palace to console

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the grieving widow while Nero was quickly spirited by the general Sextus Afranius Burrus to the camp of the Praetorian guards to be proclaimed *imperator*. Shortly thereafter Britannicus died of poisoning (personally administered, Suetonius reports, by Nero).

Although the teenaged Nero was now emperor, an uneasy coalition of Seneca, Burrus, and Agrippina ruled Rome. Seneca became the *de facto* prime minister while Burrus handled military affairs and Agrippina pursued her assorted intrigues. For the first five years this arrangement worked well. Seneca and Burrus kept Nero on a moderate course. Half a century later the emperor Trajan called this period the best governed in the history of imperial Rome.

As Nero grew older, however, he escaped Seneca's control. From the remarks of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius, we can intuit the many compromises Seneca accepted to maintain his slipping moral influence. Once again we see the conflict at the heart of Seneca's character. He was austere and noble-minded; he was also cannily practical. He wrote Nero his great epistolary essays *De Vita Beata* ("On the Happy Life"), *De Clementia* ("On Clemency"), and *De Beneficiis* ("On Benefits"), classic statements of the Stoic worldview. But Seneca also provided Nero with less attractive guidance. After spectacularly bungling the murder of his mother (in a specially constructed boat that fell apart and sank when secret lead weights were dropped), Nero sent for Seneca and Burrus in the middle of the night for emergency advice. They were shocked but realistic enough to know that Nero was not going to be talked out of completing the murder. They held their noses and helped finish the job. Tacitus claims that Seneca even wrote Nero's self-serving letter to the Senate justifying the murder on political grounds.

Caught in this murderous web of court intrigue, Seneca watched as Nero's reign degenerated into a bizarre spectacle of political violence, sexual excess, and artistic buffoonery. Posterity has not judged Seneca's later years with Nero gently. He and Burrus did what was necessary to maintain their influence. The Roman mind was ruthlessly pragmatic. Even as he sank in moral compromise, Seneca probably saw himself effecting public good by keeping away the gang of pimps, charioteers, actors, gamblers, eunuchs, and dancers who served as Nero's other confidantes. Seneca's detractors rarely point out that his moral treatises are full of self-critical confessions that his own conduct falls short of his ideals. As Michael Grant observes, "struggling with ill-health and confronted by all the perils that contemporary court and society had to offer, he did at least always try to accept the least of possible evils."

Seneca eventually became too deeply involved in Nero's regime to escape the corruptions of power. If his enemy Suillius can be believed, Seneca's consolation came less from philosophy than from wealth; he reportedly appropriated the estates of people who died childless. Tacitus implies, however, that the bulk of his wealth came as gifts from Nero. By whatever means, Seneca amassed a huge estate. His houses and gardens surpassed the emperor's. He owned the finest vineyards in Italy. When Burrus died (possibly by poison) in A.D. 62, Seneca tried to retire from politics. He offered Nero most of his property, but the emperor refused his resignation. Seneca nonetheless dismissed his retinue, renounced his extravagant public trappings, moved into the country, and avoided Rome.

With Burrus dead and Seneca removed from court, Nero had nothing to stop his plots and passions. He ordered assassinations on the slightest pretext and intrigued to marry his beautiful and vicious mistress, Poppaea. He divorced his conspicuously virtuous wife, Octavia (the daughter of Claudius), on the grounds of barrenness; later he had her executed on overtly false charges of adultery with a slave. (This incident provides the plot of the fascinating pseudo-Senecan play *Octavia*, the earliest surviving European play about current political events.) Nero was devoted to Poppaea, but one day, pregnant and ill, she

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complained to him about coming home late from the races. Losing his temper, he kicked her to death. Nero's love was no protection from Nero's anger.

Nero also loved Seneca. Having lost his natural father at three, the future emperor had a turbulent and insecure childhood dominated by Agrippina's obsessive affection (which eventually became incestuous). Nero had no love for his stepfather, Claudius. But, just as his mother settled into her loveless imperial alliance, Nero met Seneca. The sensitive and unstable boy fell under the powerful influence of the nurturing, older male who would guide him into adulthood. Seneca was brilliant, worldly, creative, and idealistic—a potent combination for an impressionable youth. Freud maintained that our superegos are formed mostly by our parents' moral values. Seneca, I suspect, became Nero's superego, his ethical conscience. Even as Nero sank into extravagant vice, he held on to Seneca as his closest counselor. Seneca represented parts of Nero's self-image the emperor was loath to abandon entirely—at least outwardly. Nero's disreputable retinue hated the philosopher-poet. They filled the emperor's ears with rumors and accusations. But until the Pisonian conspiracy plunged Nero into a murderous fright, there is no persuasive evidence that the student turned decisively against his tutor.

In A.D. 65 a group of politicians and military officers formed a plot to assassinate Nero. They secretly selected the handsome and affable patrician Gaius Calpurnius Piso as Nero's replacement. The morning of the assassination, however, a conspirator's servant informed Nero. As the size of the conspiracy became apparent, Nero panicked. Surrounding himself with guards and toadies, he embarked on a vast and bloody program of revenge. Lucan was almost certainly involved in the conspiracy. The poet whom Nero had silenced died defiantly in the grand style. Cutting his veins, he recited a stirring passage from the *Pharsalia* about a dying soldier. The entire Annaeus clan, however, was now doomed. (Also murdered in the aftermath was Petronius Arbiter, author of the first European novel, the *Satyricon*.) Seneca's death, however, was the most famous consequence of Nero's campaign. Described at length by Tacitus in his *Annals*, Seneca's suicide became the Roman equivalent of Socrates' death in Athens.

Nero sent a colonel of the imperial bodyguards to Seneca's villa to accuse the philosopher of complicity in the conspiracy. Seneca sent back an aloof rebuttal. Nero then dispatched his troops to compel Seneca to suicide. He was not allowed to make a will. According to Tacitus, Seneca turned to his friends and said: "Being forbidden . . . to show gratitude for your services, I leave you my one remaining possession, and my best: the pattern of my life."

He ended saying loudly enough for Nero's troops to hear, "After murdering his mother and brother, it only remained for him to kill his teacher and tutor." Seneca cut his wrists, but his body was so lean from his austere life that he didn't bleed sufficiently. He then drank a cup of hemlock, but it did not act fast enough. He was placed in a warm bath and then taken into a steam bath where he suffocated. He was, according to his own instructions, cremated without ceremony.

Three years later, with Gaul and Spain in revolt, Galba's army marching on Rome, and the Senate voting on the emperor's execution, the terrified Nero fled to a house outside Rome. Lacking the courage to commit suicide, he asked his attendants to set him an example by killing themselves. When they refused, he begged his secretary to help him cut his own throat before troops arrived to arrest him. "How ugly and vulgar my life has become," he moaned. The last emperor of the Julian line bled to death on a squalid couch surrounded by disgusted servants. Hearing the news, Galba proclaimed himself emperor. As Seneca had observed, "However many people a tyrant slaughters, he cannot kill his successor."

(This is Part I of a two-part essay. Part II will appear in our January issue.)

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Maple-leaf modernist: the case of Emily Carr

by Karen Wilkin

Emily Carr (1871–1945) is the Canadian Georgia O'Keeffe, the WASP Frida Kahlo. At the risk of offending those north of the 49th Parallel, I can't help feeling that it is peculiarly *Canadian* that Carr was not, like her American and Mexican "sisters," a glamorous, sexually ambiguous (and adventurous) creature but, rather, a portly spinster who ran an apartment house in the small city where she was born, taught children's painting classes, and bred sheepdogs to support her painting habit. She is reported to have been crusty, eccentric, and fonder of the company of her menagerie of cats, dogs, a parrot, and a monkey than of people. Like O'Keeffe and Kahlo, she is beloved of feminist art historians, being seen by them as that unbeatable combination, a pioneer of modernism and a "marginalized" talent. Since many of her pictures record the artifacts of Northwest Coast Indian tribes, she is perceived as an early exponent of political correctness, a sensitive, sympathetic observer of the culture of what are known in Canada as "first peoples." Also like O'Keeffe and Kahlo, Carr has a reputation that exceeds her achievement, although if push came to shove, I would rather have a Carr (of certain periods) than almost any O'Keeffe and certainly any Kahlo.

My acquaintance with Carr's work dates back to my first museum job, when, through a complicated set of circumstances, I found myself curator of a small, ambitious art museum in prairie Canada. Since neither Barnard's nor Columbia's art-history department nor a fellowship in Rome had taught me anything about Canadian art, I was obliged to give myself a crash course, to make sense of the museum's extensive—and as it turned out, quite good—collection. Among a fair number of Post-Impressionist-type landscapes, accomplished enough but in most cases executed a good twenty years after the fact, Carr's pictures stood out. More spirited and less predictable than most of the museum's holdings of the same period, some were stylized and charged in a way that reminded me of Charles Burchfield, while others, especially those on paper, had a notable freshness and luminosity of color. Then there were the ones with Indian motifs, which I didn't much like. Once I knew more about Carr's history, I wondered about the preponderance of tall, vertical elements in her work. All those thrusting trees and totem poles! Of course, as they say, a cigar is sometimes just a cigar, but many images were right up there with O'Keeffe's in the disguised or perhaps even inadvertent sexuality department. Local collectors who owned Carrs—some better than the museum's—prized them, they told me, chiefly because she captured the mood and character of the Northwest Coast forests. (I later discovered that Carr's squeezed, vertical pictures accurately evoked the impenetrable stands of old coastal trees; why she concentrated on isolated soaring trunks and looming giant stumps is, of course, still

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open to discussion.) It was also notable that this highly esteemed artist, whose works were among the most valuable in the collection, was a woman, since all the other highly esteemed Canadian painters of Carr's generation were men whose work reflected a kind of chest-beating, heroic man-against-the-elements vision of nature. More important, the best of Carr's tremulous, rhythmic, near-abstractions of growth were altogether more individual, more inventive, and looser than that of her male contemporaries—in a word, more modern.

A short digression on the history of Canadian art is in order here. Modernism came late to the north. In English Canada, in 1920, those "man-against-the-elements" types, known as the Group of Seven, were soundly ridiculed when they first exhibited images of the northern wilderness—wind-whipped lakes, craggy rocks, flaming maples, and contorted pine trees—rendered with a broad Post-Impressionist stroke and clear, unmodulated color, daring only in relation to the idealized, slickly painted academic landscapes that most Canadians admired. The Group were nonetheless quickly accepted, mostly, I suspect, because of their "program"; they declared that their mission was to reveal the soul of Canada in a way that owed nothing to foreign influence—never mind that their most adept member had learned about color and *plein air* methods in France or that they all owed an enormous debt to an exhibition of Scandinavian paintings in Buffalo. (I know, I know, but it's all true.) To dislike the Group of Seven was downright unpatriotic, and they came to define Canadian painting as dogmatically as the academic, European-trained painters against whom they had rebeled in the first place—but that's another matter.

The story in French Canada was not much different. In 1931, when John Lyman, one of Canada's best painters, had his first exhibition in Montreal after many years in France, his rather tame, Matisse-inspired canvases met with considerable resistance. Largely through Lyman's efforts, however, Montreal in the Thirties and Forties had the most forward-looking, best informed art scene in Canada, despite the stranglehold the church had on Quebec culture; in 1946, a group of Francophone Montrealers known as *Les Automatistes* emerged as Canada's first abstract painters. English Canada remained more conservative—Toronto's abstract movement didn't declare itself until 1953—and generally speaking, the further west you went, the more conservative standards continued to prevail. Emily Carr came from just about as far west as you can get, from Victoria, British Columbia, a bastion of Empire that aspired to be more English than England. (My husband, who spent his childhood there, describes it as living "behind the tweed curtain.") Born at the end of 1871 (two years after Matisse), Carr was the youngest and, to judge from the photographs, the prettiest daughter of British-born parents, newly prosperous in the colonies. Carr's family were pillars of the new town's society, and according to her memoirs, the large household, ruled by her stern father, was a model of Victorian propriety and discipline. For any Canadian of Carr's generation to devote himself to art was remarkable. For a young woman of good family to paint seriously—and to study art in San Francisco, London, and Paris—was extraordinary.

Not that Carr seemed destined to be a radical artist. Her first training and early work were conventional enough, and so apparently were her aspirations, until a self-imposed mission to record the rapidly vanishing totem poles and house fronts of the Northwest Coast's native population made her seek more advanced study. Despite her isolation, Carr was astute enough to realize that her studies in San Francisco and later at a fairly traditional London art school had not equipped her to deal with the raw power of the Indian carvings. (No, it was not the equivalent of Picasso's discovery of African sculpture in the Musée du Trocadéro.) In 1910, when she was thirty-nine, Carr and one of her unmarried sisters settled briefly in Paris, where she adopted the use of

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Fauve color, applied with a Post-Impressionist breadth of handling—hardly a radical approach, three years after *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, but light years beyond anything she had attempted in Victoria. It was immensely liberating and served as the foundation of her art for the rest of her life.

When Carr returned home, in 1912, she enjoyed a short period of local fame, and, encouraged, returned to her Indian documentation with fresh energy and enthusiasm. She now applied the lessons of Paris to indigenous Canadian subject matter, painted directly from life. This met with little favor in British Columbia, and Carr all but stopped painting for some years. Happily, her Indian paintings attracted the attention of an eminent ethnographer, who saw them not only as records of a disappearing culture but as works of art, and showed them to the director of Canada's National Gallery, who became one of Carr's most loyal supporters. By the late 1920s, Carr was exhibiting in the east, with considerable success—at least by the standards of a Canadian career of the period—and traveling to the east as well, where she came in contact with the Group of Seven. She found both the artists and their work sympathetic and inspiring, and they returned her enthusiasm. "Officially" anointed by these arbiters of Canadian art, Carr's reputation was assured, with results that may perplex feminist art historians who believe in the benefits of victimhood for women artists. Far from flourishing in adversity, Carr came into her own only after a modicum of success and approval, and it was only during the last fifteen years of her life, encouraged by the Group's attention and that of her growing circle of admirers, that she concentrated on themes that had fascinated her since her childhood—the coastal forests and the interiors of British Columbia's deep woods—and produced her most original, animated, and uninhibited works. Carr's luminous, stripped-down forest scenes and seascapes, executed in thinned-out oil on paper, are some of the most powerful, inventive works made in Canada by *anyone* in those years.

Toward the end of her life, Carr began to be known as a writer as well as a painter. She published stories about her encounters with Indians when she traveled along the coast, visiting and painting the remains of once powerful villages; a memoir of her nineteenth-century childhood in Victoria; tributes to her various pets and "creatures"; tales of her life as a landlady; details of her sojourns in the woods in an odd, jerry-built "camper," nicknamed "the Elephant," and more. An autobiography, *Growing Pains*, and a selection from her journals, *Hundreds and Thousands*, were published posthumously, but all of Carr's writings are first-person recollections.

The University of Washington Press has just brought all of this together in *The Emily Carr Omnibus*,[1] a hefty nine-hundred-page volume, with a useful introduction by the Canadian Carr specialist Doris Shadbolt. Some of the book is extremely appealing: the portrait of the rebellious child fonder of the muddy cow yard than of the decorous flower garden where her sisters "played at ladies," or the evocative descriptions of eerie Indian villages, populated only by hieratic carvings, threatened by the unstoppable growth of the forest. The affectionate animal stories are refreshingly unsentimental, while the descriptions of pioneer days in starchy Victoria and of the deep forest interior of British Columbia are equally vivid. Carr's style is usually straightforward, and unpretentious. (It reminds me of the no-nonsense, grammatically rigorous conversation of the octogenarian ladies I met on the prairie, a vigorous, seemingly immortal breed whose Edwardian phrases were delivered in a British accent and cadence, after more than half a century in Canada.) But Carr's tone varies not at all; the *Omnibus* is all a bit much of a muchness, so that larger doses are less engaging than a sampling.

More disturbing, longer acquaintance with Emily Carr does not make her more

1 *The Emily Carr Omnibus*, with an introduction by Doris Shadbolt; University of Washington Press, 893 pages, $40.

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likable. It's not just her sporadic xenophobia, her condescending descriptions of "Chinamen" and "Jew boys," or her actively unpleasant efforts to reproduce dialect and foreign accents phonetically. These are disagreeable, even offensive to 1990s readers, but not wholly unexpected in someone of Carr's generation and background, shaped by the accepted practices of her formative years in a colonial outpost. Yet even if we remember that Carr was born and strictly raised in the era of Queen Victoria, it's difficult to sympathize with her prissiness, with her distress when a tenant hangs a washline of men's underwear and women's "scanties" in plain view or her rage and horror at discovering that she has an unmarried couple cohabitating under her roof.

What is even harder to take is the person who emerges from Carr's writings: mean-spirited, self-aggrandizing, intolerant, self-satisfied, and for all her much-vaunted dislike of "sham," a snob. *The House of All Sorts* (1944), Carr's recollections of being a landlady, for example, is relentlessly peevish and self-righteous. Her tenants, every one of them, make unreasonable demands on her time and patience. Almost without exception, they are deplorable people with nasty habits and vastly inferior in every respect to their long-suffering landlady. There are passing allusions to a few decent, agreeable renters, but the unpleasant ones get most of Carr's attention. Granted, running the building must have been pretty grim. (Even when I lived in western Canada, twenty years ago, it was clear that "nice" people owned the houses they lived in; I kept being asked things like, "In New York, dear, did your parents live in an apartment or a home?") The apartment house contained a studio and living quarters for Carr, as well as four rental units, and was designed to give her an income, time, and a place to paint. Apparently, it demanded far more of her than foreseen. But could it have been as unremittingly awful as she writes?

There are other irritants. In her recollections of childhood, *The Book of Small* (1942), and her autobiography, *Growing Pains* (1946), the young, misunderstood Emily always emerges as more sensitive, more inventive, bolder, and generally more *winsome* than her sisters and friends, who are described as what would have been called in my school days "goody-goodies." Carr's father and the much older sister who ran the Carr household after their mother's death are pilloried as unbending and unloveable. Family friends, neighbors, and acquaintances over the years are almost all depicted as sanctimonious hypocrites. None of this is made more palatable by what can be described only as the persistent twee-ness of the writing. Carr refers to her two older sisters and herself as "Big," "Middle," and "Small"; a policeman called to help get a refractory tenant to pay overdue rent is called "Law." And so on.

The best part of the *Omnibus* is *Hundreds and Thousands* (1966), excerpts from Carr's journals from the late 1920s on, which deal chiefly with her life as a painter and often provide illuminating comments on specific works. Entries like these of September 6 and 9, 1937, tell a good deal about how Carr thought about her late, ecstatic paintings, even about how she worked:

> I started a new canvas today, a skyscape with roots and gravel pits. I am striving for a wide, open sky with lots of movement, which is taken down into dried greens in the foreground and connected by roots and stumps to sky. My desire is to have it free and jubilant, not crucified into one spot, static. The colour of the brilliantly lighted sky will contrast with the black, white and tawny earth . . .
>
> I have started a woods canvas. I am aiming at a trembling upward movement full of light and joy. I blocked in movement first thing with a very large brush and was thrilled.

Carr seems to be more reliable in talking about her art than about her life. You can't take her first-person memoirs at face value. She begins *Klee Wyck* (1941), the stories of her travels to Indian villages, by announcing that she was a fifteen-year-old school girl, all

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alone, when she took her first trip up the coast, when, in fact, she was twenty-seven and accompanied by an older sister—that sort of thing. Carr's biographers have striven to track the discrepancies in her autobiographical statements, correcting them with more accurate, factual information. The most recent, Paula Blanchard, in *The Life of Emily Carr* (1987),[2] makes scrupulous attempts to set the record straight, comparing verifiable facts and Carr's version of events, given as quotations from the journals and reminiscences. It is, in some ways, a useful antidote to Carr's rather self-serving writings, but it offers little new information, although Blanchard is, to her credit, frank about acknowledging her extreme dependence on previous publications by Maria Tippett and Doris Shadbolt, among others. What *The Life of Emily Carr* purports to add to the Carr literature is psychological insight, from an orthodox feminist point of view, as explanation for her obvious distortions of reality. It's not very edifying.

The book also suffers acutely from Blanchard's lack of any real knowledge of the history of modernist art, any ability to make informed qualitative judgments about painting or sculpture, and any particular insight into her subject's work. Carr's friendship with the American visionary painter Mark Tobey, her seeing an exhibition of Charles Burchfield's watercolors on a trip to New York in 1930, her first encounter with the work of O'Keeffe and her subsequent meeting with the artist—such things are itemized but are not illuminatingly related to Carr's paintings. Blanchard declares, for example, that while this exposure to advanced American painting was important to Carr, it principally served to confirm her own direction. Then why do Carr's post-1930 landscapes look so much more like Burchfields than those from the preceding years? The thread of crackpot spirituality that links many of Carr's important encounters and friendships, which is implied by some of her writings and rendered fairly explicitly in many of her paintings, is treated just as summarily. Blanchard discusses the phenomenon, mainly in relation to Carr's champion among the Group of Seven, the theosophist Lawren Harris, but most of the argument has to do with the "soul of Canada," not with the peculiar relationship of modernist painting and mysticism in the twentieth century. That Harris's paintings got steadily worse, the more deeply he became involved in theosophy, is simply not mentioned.

In the end, Carr's art proves far more compelling than any of her writings or the story of her life. Doris Shadbolt's 1976 study *The Art of Emily Carr*, reissued by the University of Washington Press in 1987, remains the best, most informative study to date, more revealing, in many ways, than Blanchard's biography. Better still is a trip to the Vancouver Art Gallery; they have a large collection of Carrs and it is on permanent display.

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2 *The Life of Emily Carr*, by Paula Blanchard; University of Washington Press, 331 pages, $25.

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More than sensational: the life & art of Wilkie Collins

by Brooke Allen

Wilkie Collins, the author of Victorian masterpieces of suspense including *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, seems to have found the secret to a happy life: Do as you please and be damned. He had not an ounce of the native puritanism of the Anglo-Saxon. He loved pleasure of all kinds: food, drink, women, the theater. Visits to France and Italy early in life had confirmed him in the belief that his fellow-Englishmen were hypocrites regarding sex and barbarians when it came to the arts of the table, that "a man who eats a plain joint is only one remove from a cannibal—or a butcher." His self-indulgent habits told on him, and in middle age, according to Julian Hawthorne, the son of the novelist, "he was soft, plump, and pale, suffered from various ailments, his liver was wrong, his heart weak, his lungs faint, his stomach incompetent, he ate too much and the wrong things." Nevertheless, he continued to take his pleasures where he could, determined to make the most of life.

He was a firm enemy of social convention. A radical and a bohemian with a bourgeois fondness for comfort, Collins did exactly as he liked, shocking a number of people in the process. From 1858 until the end of his life he lived with a semi-respectable widow, Caroline Graves, and her daughter Elizabeth (called Carrie); from about 1865 he had also a second mistress, Martha Rudd, by whom he fathered two children. This he called his "morganatic family." Public disapproval bothered Collins not at all; he had always hated "Society," and was only too pleased to be excluded from it. His friends remained his friends.

In any case, many of his circle enjoyed or suffered from marital irregularities. There was Charles Dickens's separation from his wife, Catherine; Holman Hunt's long and stormy liaison with his illiterate model, Annie Miller; John Everett Millais's marriage to Mrs. Ruskin, whose first marriage had never been consummated; William Frith's seven children by his mistress and his twelve by his wife. George Eliot and George Lewes lived together openly, as did Charles Reade and the actress Laura Seymour.

What set Collins apart was his specific dislike for the institution of marriage, and he was not afraid to voice his objection in print. "The real fact seems to be, that the general idea of the scope and purpose of the Institution of Marriage is a miserably narrow one. . . . The social advantages which it is fitted to produce ought to extend beyond one man and one woman, to the circle of society amid which they move," he wrote in "Bold Words by a Bachelor" (1856). Collins did not shy from the responsibilities that marriage involved—he willingly supported both his households—or even from a more settled way of life; his relationship with Caroline was a settled one, and time with his "morganatic family" was spent in conventional domestic activity. His stated objections to the institution appear to have been quite sincere, and when in 1868 Caroline tried to

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pressure him into wedlock by threatening to marry another man, he called her bluff. (She lived with her new husband, Joseph Clow, for two years, then returned to Collins upon exactly the same basis as before.)

Sensitive though he was to the potential selfishness of marriage, Collins was amazingly obtuse when it came to the actual selfishness of his own bachelor existence. As the author of *No Name*, he had passionately criticized the law that deprived illegitimate children of their legal rights and place in society; as a father, he blandly condemned his own children to suffer these indignities. As a result, his daughters, who lived until 1955, never married and never acknowledged their connection with the novelist. It seems that Collins, generous friend though he was, had a tough streak of egotism, or at least of stubbornness: no one was going to make him do otherwise than his own inclinations directed. Yet he was a kind man, and inspired only affection in the overwhelming majority of his acquaintances. His charm partly stemmed from his lack of interest in social advancement. "Wilkie was entirely without ambition to take a place in the competition of society," wrote Holman Hunt, "and avoided plans of life that necessitated the making up of his mind enough to forecast the future. In this respect he left all to circumstance." Yet Collins was anything but careless; he worked industriously, with a conscientious professionalism, and met his deadlines even when incapacitated by illness, as he was throughout his last years.

To today's readers, he is known simply as the author of *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*. A few others have read *Armadale* and *No Name*, and though Collins was the author of thirty-three books as well as many plays and magazine articles, his modern reputation rests exclusively on these four novels, all published in the 1860s.

They are indeed extraordinary, the more so in that they belong, at least in part, to the most ephemeral of all literary genres: melodrama. T. S. Eliot, one of Collins's most influential admirers, wrote of *Armadale* that "it has no merit beyond melodrama, and it has every merit that melodrama can have." I think it is time that Eliot's judgment, taken as gospel by many twentieth-century readers, be challenged, or at least broadened. Collins's best fiction comprises melodrama, suspense, and mystery: but it is made complete, made literature rather than simply genre fiction, by a strange and passionate moral vision. This perhaps is one of the reasons that his books are as startlingly vivid, as mesmerically readable, today as they were upon their appearance. Comparing *The Woman in White* or *No Name* with other popular melodramas of the nineteenth century—*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, say, or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—Collins's novels have the ring of absolute modernity while the others have dwindled into fusty, faintly ridiculous dullness. Suspense novels with great longevity are rare (how absurd will the works of Stephen King appear to readers a century hence?) and for this reason alone Wilkie Collins might be accounted an extraordinary writer. But there are other reasons, many others.

First among these is Collins's abundant gift for invention. So great was it that he could afford to be profligate with ideas. With *The Moonstone*, for example, he virtually invented the modern detective novel. (I say "virtually" because Poe had already written his tales of C. Auguste Dupin; but the book-length, fleshed-out plot with a crime at its center was Collins's creation, and many of the book's details have now become conventions of the genre.) But while *The Moonstone*'s innovations have been refined, elaborated, and imitated by thousands of writers over more than a century, Collins himself never again exploited the genre he had created.

Another characteristic that gives Collins's work its life was the assurance, which he shared with many of his great contemporaries—Thackeray, Trollope, Charlotte Brontë, but most of all his brother-in-arms Dickens—that writing for the masses did not imply writing down to them. In Collins's day, highbrow and lowbrow had not

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yet parted company; the best literature was popular literature, and Collins considered his readers (measured in volume of sales) to be the final judges of his work, rather than the convention-bound critics. Had he lived long enough to witness the Joycean ideal of god-like aesthetic detachment in the writer, he would have been disgusted. As it was, he sought an audience even broader than the voracious general readership of his own period, trying again and again to entrap even the lowest echelon of readers, the "Unknown Public" which read cheap and sensational newspapers rather than books. Though he never succeeded in this final goal, Collins was throughout his career a democratic artist who boldly made his bid for popularity and won it in an almost unhoped-for measure. Swinburne was correct when he offered that "though Dickens was not a Shakespeare, and though Collins was not a Dickens, it is permissible to anticipate that their names and their works will be familiar to generations unacquainted with the existence and unaware of the eclipse of their most shining, most scornful, and most superior critics."

Collins was exceptional, too, in the way that he adorned his sensational plots with a finely drawn psychological truth. Unlike the typical characters of melodrama, his are no mere types but living people, sometimes etched with a delicacy of nuance that brings to mind George Eliot rather than his fellow-melodramatists, even the greatest melodramatist of all, Dickens. In spite of Collins's friendship with Dickens—and it was certainly the formative friendship of his career, if not of his life—it was to Balzac that Collins looked for inspiration, and to Balzac's breadth of vision that never excluded the petty, the sordid, the contradictory. Balzac he saw as the greatest portrayer of women, while Dickens was limited in this area: Collins believed Nancy in *Oliver Twist* to be "the finest thing [Dickens] ever did. He never afterwards saw all sides of a woman's character—saw all round her." He himself tried always, with varying levels of success, to see "all round" his women characters, an attempt that did not commend him to certain of his critics. When *No Name* was published in 1862, the reviewer Margaret Oliphant wrote in horror of Magdalen Vanstone, the book's heroine, revolted by her "career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness . . . from all the pollutions of which he intends us to believe that she emerges, at the cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded, and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines." Of course Collins never intended even the reformed Magdalen to seem high-minded or spotless; she remains the flawed but attractive character she has been from the beginning. Her sister Norah, who bears the sisters' discovery of their illegitimacy and their subsequent fall into penury with modest resignation, ultimately wins back the family fortune by virtue alone, but it is almost as though Collins simply threw her in as a sop for those who require virtue in a heroine. It is always the ruthless Magdalen with whom the reader identifies, though she goes so far as to prostitute herself by tricking into marriage a man who repels her. Collins deftly manipulates the reader's sympathies so that they turn against Norah and the girls' governess, who have Magdalen's best interests at heart, perversely presenting them as mere encumbrances to Magdalen's search for revenge against the cousin who has robbed her of her fortune and her name.

He again employs a "double heroine" in *The Woman in White*. Here is the most memorable character in all his fiction, the magnificent Marian Halcombe, a vigorous, passionate, strong-minded young woman who is the most active force for good in the book. Yet, as though to comment upon society's ideal of feminine dependency, Collins condemns Marian to permanent spinsterhood, making the helpless Laura Fairlie the book's nominal heroine. When Laura agrees to marry the sinister Sir Percival Glyde, her father's choice, rather than the young drawing instructor Walter Hartright, whom she loves, her passive betrayal not only of her lover but of herself means that she more or less colludes in the plot to steal

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her identity and confine her to an insane asylum. Yet the colorless Laura is rewarded with a loving husband and son; Marian, the fighter, who risks her life for Laura, must content herself with the role of aunt. Again, Collins manipulates the reader's sympathies so that they are at odds with the accepted moral code and the role it assigned to women.

He simply felt that life was more complicated, circumstances more extenuating than middle-class English society was willing to admit. Sex, and sex among the unmarried, was a fact of life. Why could others not acknowledge it? He was outraged by the concurrence of Dickens's friend and biographer, John Forster, in the platitude that all of Dickens's work could be put into the hands of children. "It is impossible to read such stuff as this without a word of protest," he wrote.

> If it is true, which it is not, it would imply the condemnation of Dickens's books as works of art, it would declare him to be guilty of deliberately presenting to his readers a false reflection of human life. If this wretched English claptrap means anything it means that the novelist is forbidden to touch on the sexual relations which literally swarm about him, and influence the lives of millions of his fellow-creatures, [except when] those relations are licensed by the ceremony called marriage. One expects this essentially immoral view of the functions of the novelist from a professor of claptrap like the late Bishop of Manchester. But that Forster should quote it with approval is a sad discovery indeed.

The modernity of Collins's books, then, is largely due to his moral vision, which harmonizes far more readily with the relativistic attitudes of our own time than it did with the popular standards of the 1860s. Many have called Collins an atheist. He was not a churchgoer, but he was emphatically not an atheist; he simply believed God's tolerance and forgiveness to be extended far beyond some narrow elect—a belief to be found throughout *No Name*, an essentially Christian book. Cruelty was hard to forgive, sexual weakness easy.

How was this easy-going iconoclast formed? In her new and entertaining biography of Wilkie Collins,[1] Catherine Peters proposes that he determined to escape "the mental inhibitions of the obsession with class that his father had allowed to throttle his freedom." For though Collins's childhood was a happy one, his parents prosperous and affectionate, there can be no doubt that the father's character—which Peters represents as a "mixture of grovelling humility, anxiety and family affection"—forced an uncongenial code of behavior upon the son.

William Collins was a well-known painter, a member of the Royal Academy, and very much a pillar of England's artistic establishment. He was not, perhaps, an artist who would appeal much to modern tastes, for he ran to heavy-handed conversation pieces with titles like "The Burial-Place of a Favourite Bird" and "The Sale of the Pet Lamb." Nor was he greatly admired by his more brilliant contemporaries. Constable, who despised his work, described one of William's contributions to the Academy Exhibition as "a coast scene with fish, as usual, and a landscape like a large cow-turd." Nevertheless, William gave his sons, William Wilkie (born 1824) and Charles Allston (born 1828), a wonderful education in the art of seeing and an appreciation for the privileges of an artist's life. He often expressed his belief that "the study of the Art was in itself so delightful, that it balanced almost all the evils of life . . . that an artist with tolerable success had no right to complain of anything." Wilkie (who dropped the "William" from his name in adolescence) later wrote of his father that "an excursion with him in the country was a privilege. . . . He possessed the peculiar facility of divesting his profession of all its mysteries and

1 *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins*, by Catherine Peters; Princeton University Press, 502 pages, $29.95.

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technicalities, and of enabling the most uneducated in his Art to look at Nature with *his* eyes, and enjoy Nature with *his* zest."

Wilkie Collins was always a visual writer, constructing his scenes in a vivid, painterly fashion. In this his father's training was instrumental, as was the fact that he spent his entire life around painters. As a child he was surrounded by his father's friends in the profession, who included Turner; his aunt, Margaret Carpenter, was one of the best portraitists of her time; his younger brother, Charley, was a fairly considerable Pre-Raphaelite painter; Wilkie himself studied painting and even had a work exhibited at the Academy Exhibition of 1849. Wilkie included among his own intimate friends the Pre-Raphaelites Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt, as well as the Academy Painters (whose work he preferred) W. P. Frith, Augustus Egg, and Edward Ward.

A careful (some said niggling) artist, William Collins was anything but a bohemian. His modest gifts had afforded him an escape from the obscurity and near-poverty of his youth to the privilege and social position he craved, and he passionately embraced the values of the upper-middle class. Among the perks of his trade were professional visits to the country houses of the great, from where, Peters tells us, "his loving letters to his wife often contain, as well as chat about the titled and famous people he is mixing with, reference to a good sermon, or a pious exhortation not to forget the blessings of the Almighty." When he sent Wilkie to school, he chose Mr. Cole's establishment at Highbury, telling the boy that there "you will make aristocratic connections which will be of the greatest use to you in life."

It goes without saying that Wilkie never did make use of these connections. He had already rejected his father's ambitions for upward mobility, turning with gusto toward the raffish and the sybaritic. He became a conscientious non-conformist: "He had only to identify a conventional attitude," writes Peters, "to want instantly to outrage it; to hear a platitude and contradict it; to have an expectation held of him and disappoint it." The boy cheerfully failed at each new start in life his father arranged for him, including a five-year stint with a tea-merchant in the Strand, an establishment Wilkie baldly called "a prison."

William Collins took his family on a long visit to Italy and France from 1836 to 1838, when Wilkie was an adolescent, and from this time on the boy adopted continental attitudes to religion, sex, and food, in obvious reaction to his father's neophobia and piety. Also in contrast to his father, Wilkie was bumptious and sexually self-confident, in spite of his strange appearance: he stood under 5' 6", his hands and feet were smaller than a woman's, and there was a bulging protuberance on his forehead.

Though Wilkie began studying law in 1846, his ambitions were by that time wholly literary: he had started a novel. Its composition was interrupted, however, by the death of William Collins, and Wilkie set about the task of writing his father's official "Life." The finished biography[2] was Collins's first published book, and it was received with enthusiasm: ". . . no better work upon art and artists has been given to the world in the last half-century," wrote the *Observer* critic.

Though she had been devoted to her husband, Harriet Collins felt unexpectedly liberated upon his death. After years as the sober helpmeet of a serious and ambitious man, she became ebullient and witty, the dominant force in her sons' lives. She moved to a new house and began running what was in effect a salon for the artists who were her sons' friends: Millais, Frith, and Egg, among others. Wilkie and Charley were content for many years to live with Harriet, using her as landlady, banker, and hostess. She had a firmer hold on her sons than did any of the women in their lives, and Collins was repeatedly to speak of her death (in 1868) as the greatest sorrow of his life.

The new atmosphere at home proved a fruitful one for Collins. He at last completed

2 *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*; London, 1848.

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his novel, *Antonina: or the Fall of Rome*, published in 1850. It was a historical romance modeled upon the works of Bulwer-Lytton and Scott, and dealt with the destructive nature of religious fanaticism and extremism of all sorts; it was a great success with reviewers. He followed this with a light travel book about Cornwall, *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851). His publisher was Richard Bentley, a useful connection in that he also put out a magazine, *Bentley's Miscellany*, that became an outlet for Collins's growing stream of articles and stories. The first editor of this periodical had been Charles Dickens, and it was at this point in his life that Collins first became acquainted with the older novelist.

Dickens was producing a new play, *Not So Bad As We Seem*, in aid of the Guild of Literature and Art. Himself the star, he recruited Collins to play a small part. Dickens's rehearsal pace—long, grueling hours followed by riotous parties—suited Collins's temperament, and the two men quickly became friends. John Forster's jealousy of Collins's friendship with Dickens caused him practically to omit Collins from what was for years the definitive biography of the great man, but we now know that during the mid-Fifties Collins became Dickens's bosom-friend, taking the place of earlier companions like Forster and Daniel Maclise. Collins's professionalism matched Dickens's, and his liking for fun and dissipation made him especially attractive. For Dickens had become something of a prisoner in the role of household deity he had created for himself, and family life was growing less congenial to him as he became estranged from his wife and disappointed in his children. Collins's taste for brothels, music halls, and actresses was shared by Dickens; his openness about sexual matters was exciting, if a little threatening to Dickens's chosen image. They traveled together in Europe, Collins flaunting his knowledge of painting and his adolescent sexual experiences in Italy before the more insular Dickens, but generally making himself agreeable: "Collins eats and drinks everything," Dickens wrote home to his wife. "Gets on very well everywhere, and is always in good spirits."

Dickens gave Collins valuable business advice about the publication of *Basil* (1852), his first novel with a modern setting; he gave him work writing stories for his magazine *Household Words*, including one classic, "A Terribly Strange Bed"; and, in 1853, he made Collins one of the "young men" on the magazine's staff. Collins attacked social convention here and in *The Leader*, a radical newspaper founded by George Lewes and Thornton Leigh Hunt: "A Plea for Sunday Reform," for instance, or an editorial on the dreadful legal status accorded married women. When his outbursts became too radical for *Household Words*' more middle-of-the-road politics, Dickens would gently edit him.

Peters demonstrates that it required an effort for Collins to retain his independence from the Dickens machine. "All Wilkie's good-humored stubbornness was needed to keep his own style and literary integrity, to remain something more than one of Dickens's 'young men.'" And though Collins continued to publish his own novels (*Hide and Seek*, 1854; *The Dead Secret*, 1857), his output was markedly slower during these years than at other times in his life. Dickens could be high-handed: when Collins showed him a play he had written, *The Lighthouse*, Dickens appropriated it, did some rewriting, and gave it an amateur production with himself in the lead, rather than the professional one with which Collins sought to break into the theater. Nevertheless, Collins's long apprenticeship with Dickens strengthened his work. The older man's energy and rich imagination were infectious, and it is worth noting that after Dickens's death in 1870 Collins never again wrote anything of great imaginative force.

In 1858 the lives of both men changed direction. Dickens's love for the young actress Ellen Ternan forced him to a final break with his wife, and Collins began living openly with Caroline Graves, leaving his mother's house for the first time at the age of thirty-four. (In his biography of his father,

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John Guille Millais tells a melodramatic story of Collins's first meeting with Caroline: alone and dressed entirely in white, fleeing a mesmerist at dead of night, she appeared like a ghost to Collins and his companions. Peters ridicules the unsubstantiated story.) The way in which Dickens and Collins dealt with their personal crises marks the profound differences between them. Collins was perfectly open about his relationship with Caroline, and if he did not invite her everywhere he went, it was not out of shame but because he often preferred traveling as a bachelor. Dickens took the opposite tack. But while he tried to keep his link with Ellen Ternan a secret, his separation from his wife was inevitably made public, and he responded with defensive bluster, even destroying *Household Words* because its publishers refused to print his own version of the separation in *Punch*.

The dissolution of the magazine gave birth to a larger one, however, when Dickens replaced it with *All the Year Round*. He decided that each number would begin with a serialized piece of fiction by a well-known author. He himself launched the periodical with *A Tale of Two Cities*, and he asked Collins to follow it up with a new novel of his own. The result was *The Woman in White*.

The kernel of the story, based a true case, Collins described as "a conspiracy in private life, in which circumstances are so handled as to rob a woman of her identity by confounding her with another woman, sufficiently like her in personal appearance to answer the wicked purpose." Challenged by Dickens's example, Collins set out to write, above all, a page-turner. "I *must* stagger the public into attention, if possible, at the outset. They shan't drop a number, when I begin, if *I* can help it." But he overstepped the mark in his zeal. "I have yielded to the worst temptation that besets a novelist—the temptation to begin with a striking incident, without counting the cost in the shape of explanations that must and will follow." He had to begin again—but the new beginning, of course, was more striking yet: Walter Hartright's famous meeting with Anne Catherick, the Woman in White, late in the evening on a Hampstead road.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Collins chose to ignore the stringencies of serial publication. He felt that the most important thing was to keep "the story always advancing, without paying the smallest attention to the serial division in parts, or to the book publication in volumes." The result is a remarkably free-flowing, suspenseful narrative, unmarred (at least to the modern reader) by sub-plots or comic supporting characters. Unquestionably thrilling, the book has many other virtues. Its narration by a series of characters in turn (inspired by Collins's visit to a criminal trial) ensures a continual freshness of outlook, gives differing interpretations of the events, and shows, in Collins's best style, the relativism of any received moral notions. The feminist heroine, Marian Halcombe, is something quite new in English literature; the arch-villain, Count Fosco, is an equally superb creation, with his brilliant and all-too-plausible attacks upon the English moral code. Most striking of all is Collins's use of humor, which is always intrinsic to the central situation and never, as in so many popular novels of the period, appended as mere filler. Take, for example, Walter's first meeting with Marian.

> I looked from the table to the window farthest from me, and saw a lady standing at it, with her back turned towards me. The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays. . . . She turned towards me immediately. The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is

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> dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!

The Woman in White was nothing less than a blockbuster. Lines formed to buy each new number of *All the Year Round*, and the periodical achieved staggering circulation figures, three times that of *Household Words*. There were "Woman in White" perfumes and toiletries, cloaks and bonnets; there was a Fosco Galop and a Woman in White Waltz. Collins's commercial success now allowed him to dictate his own price to publishers, and though the highbrow *Cornhill* was too late to snag his next book, already promised to *All the Year Round*, its editor offered him an enormous sum for the following one. Collins was gleeful. "Five Thousand Pounds!!!!!! Ha! ha! ha! Five thousand pounds for nine months or at most a year's work—nobody but Dickens has made as much."

He was already at work on *No Name*. Dickens was excited by what he read, but gave his protégé a suggestion:

> It seems to me that great care is needed not to tell the story too severely. In exact proportion as you play around it here and there, and mitigate the severity of your own sticking to it, you will enhance and intensify the power with which Magdalen holds on to her purpose. For this reason I should have given Mr. Pendril some touches of comicality, and should have generally lighted up the house with some such capital touches of whimsicality and humour as those with which you have irradiated the private theatricals.

Fortunately, Collins ignored this advice. Only a writer of Dickens's own genius could have carried off such "whimsicality" and "comicality" without destroying the straightforward narrative rush which was Collins's particular strength. *No Name* sold well, though critics were repelled by its heroine. *Armadale*, Collins's next novel, was serialized in *Cornhill* from 1865 to 1866. Again, he chose a heroine who would shock: Lydia Gwilt was even more cynical and tough than Magdalen Vanstone. *Armadale* did not justify the magazine's financial output, selling relatively slowly. But it is one of Collins's best books, in fact the very acme of the "sensation novel" of the Sixties that he did so much to define and popularize. The sensation novel dealt with crime, adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, sex, murder, or any combination thereof. *Armadale* and *No Name* are the best the genre has to offer; Collins now set out to challenge his audience's expectations by changing the rules of the game.

In so doing he created a new and more durable genre. "*The Moonstone* is the first and greatest of English detective novels," according to Eliot, and this is an opinion shared by many. In this novel the detective story as we know it today bursts amazingly, fully matured, upon the scene. Its precedents were few. There was the Inspector Bucket sub-plot of Dickens's *Bleak House*. There were, as I've said, the Dupin stories: but, as Eliot pointed out, "the detective story, as created by Poe, is something as specialized and as intellectual as a chess problem; whereas the best English detective fiction has relied less on the beauty of the mathematical problem and much more on the intangible human element." It is Collins's Sergeant Cuff, with his inductive reasoning and his passion for roses, who is the direct ancestor of Sherlock Holmes and his progeny.

Like *The Woman in White*, *The Moonstone* has many virtues other than those of its genre. The first is the respect accorded the Hindu religion. The jewel has been stolen from a Hindu temple by the wicked John Herncastle and left in his will to his niece Rachel Verinder. Though the book's series of narrators all treat the diamond as Rachel's rightful property—and indeed, Rachel is innocent of any taint of theft—Collins gently enlists our sympathies with the mysterious, even murderous, Brahmin priests who seek the stone, and we rejoice at the moonstone's

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ultimate return to its temple. This may seem straightforward enough today, but the novel was written hardly a decade after the Indian Mutiny, and the vengeful jingoism it had caused in England was still the overwhelmingly dominant attitude.

The novel was also remarkable in its bold sympathy for poor working women. With *The Moonstone*'s Rosanna Spearman, the ugly housemaid who dares to fall in love with the young gentleman Franklin Blake and commits suicide for her unrequited love, Collins cast a very uncomfortable shadow over the reader's feelings for the charming Franklin. His inability to recognize the girl's love and her pain is a real fault: as Rosanna's friend Lucy says, "He bewitched her. Don't tell me he didn't mean it, and didn't know it. . . . Cruel, cruel, cruel."

The Moonstone was another best seller, spawning imitations of all kinds: *The Eustace Diamonds*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and *The Sign of Four* are three of the more famous books which drew inspiration from the story. But *The Moonstone* was the last of Collins's great books. After this, his talents seemed to fade, for several reasons.

His health, never good, began to handicap him intolerably. He suffered from a debilitating condition which he described as "rheumatic gout," and as it grew more severe, he became more and more dependent on laudanum (an opium-based drug) to ease his discomfort. Eventually he was taking massive doses, and the disease and the drug combined to make long periods of concentrated work a painful process. The death of Dickens, two years after the publication of *The Moonstone*, ended Collins's most fruitful working relationship. Also, his success as a playwright began to play havoc with his fiction; he took to writing his books with one eye on their immediate transformation into plays, and his fictional constructions suffered for it. Some feel, too, that his consuming political interests—the rights of women, anti-vivisectionism, divorce law reform—began during this period to take precedence over his attention to art, and that in the absence of Dickens, he became a disciple of Charles Reade, the leading proponent of "Fiction with a Purpose." Swinburne's parody of Pope—

> What brought good Wilkie's genius nigh perdition?
> Some demon whispered—'Wilkie! have a mission'

—is, perhaps, partly true.

Meanwhile, in the eyes of the great public, Collins was becoming old hat. The most intelligent readers no longer turned to melodrama, and the style of the time, naturalism, was a closed book to him. He was too highbrow for the new mass-readership newspapers, yet out-of-touch with the tastes of educated readers. He was in fact one of the first victims of the new rift between literature for the elite and literature for the masses, and Peters points out that "Collins, who had always believed passionately that the two could and should be combined, found himself caught in the middle." A younger writer such as Robert Louis Stevenson was able to take Collins's material and turn it once more to magic—for surely Collins, with his recurrent motif of the double, is one inspiration behind both *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Master of Ballantrae*. But for Collins himself the magic no longer worked. He wrote several more novels, notably *Heart and Science* (1883), *The Evil Genius* (1886), and *Blind Love*, which he was still working on when he died, in agonizing pain, in 1889. Walter Besant finished the novel, on Collins's request and following his fantastically thorough notes.

Meredith, Hardy, and Harry Quilter raised a subscription for a memorial to Collins in St. Paul's, but the Dean and Chapter refused to consider memorializing so notorious a fornicator. The money was used in a way that Collins would have preferred, to create the "Wilkie Collins Memorial Library of Fiction" at the People's Palace in the East End, later Queen Mary's College.

Catherine Peters's biography is timely, for Wilkie Collins is a strangely modern charac-

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ter, his eccentricities likely to appeal to late-twentieth-century readers, his books worthy of a new surge of interest. His disdain for cant and for social niceties are as merciless as anything that came out of his own century, or has come out of ours. "Shall I tell you what a lady is?" Magdalen Vanstone asks her maid. "A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head." Collins knew that gentility and respectability are constructed of surfaces, with no more solidity than air. But any disdain he felt for the human race was always far overshadowed by his principal quality—kindness. Collins was, above all, a kind man, and he understood the well-kept secret that kindness is not a simple virtue but a difficult one, closely allied with intelligence and sensibility. "Examples may be found every day of a fool who is no coward," he wrote; "examples may occasionally be found of a fool who is not cunning; but it may be reasonably doubted whether there is a producible instance anywhere of a fool who is not cruel."

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Poems *by Louis Simpson, Charles Tomlinson & Mary Jo Salter*

The choir master's evening party

Mr. Cooper, the physics teacher,
was a cross-eyed little Englishman.
When he was angry he reddened
and shouted and spit flew.
He was also in charge of the choir
and would have us to his house.
We sang "The Londonderry Air,"
"What shall we do with the drunken sailor?"
and a song with the refrain,
"Oh no John, no John, no John, no!"
which was daring. Then Mrs. Cooper
who wore black ankle boots
came in and gave us tea and biscuits.

The evening came to an end
with a song about a dying swan,
and we walked back across the commons.
The moon stared through a window
on rows of beds. No talking
after "lights out." The diesel
labored in the night. The house master
coughed in his study. I lay
and listened to the roof beams creaking
in the wind from across the sea.

—*Louis Simpson*

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Four for David Smith

to Paula

Interior for exterior

They tried to bring the whole of the view
into the room. But the strain
of space four walls could not contain
forced them at last to see
you could let in the outlines only
of hill, house, tree
to compose a cosmos circling,
signs in supple flight that show
which way the winds blow,
angels about to alight on a pinpoint
but who keep on flowing.

The timeless clock

The circular ride was shaking it to pieces,
the same track, the same worn ratchets
slewed out of kilter
but pacing shakily on,
falling apart as it strained towards
the open air,
the crumbling clouds re-shaping,
the continuity of rivers—
all that a circle cannot hold.

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Hudson River landscape

Not the sublime.
There is a time for that also,
but the present occasion
is more a question
of how do you hold a conversation
and with whom. To make that clear
I have turned my house into a foundry:
Picasso, González, Miró
all are welcome here. Where are the trees?
These are the branches of the trees—
I have invited space in
to pick them clean. I have written them
on the air
like a letter that will arrive
by first post and the fable
of the first day turn fact,
the light equable.

Bolton Landing

The ballet
of iron
beneath
a winter sky:
it was a man
made these
bare boughs.

—*Charles Tomlinson*

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A dissertation

Up in the stacks, it's thesis time.
Along a lineup of dented desks,
the little yellow slips of paper
marked "Carrel Charge" peep from the tops
of books like rows of crocuses.
Late March, and only one month left
to weed and water.

But where are our scholars? Well, it's Sunday.
When up against it, the young sleep in.
In the carrels, the little corner on learning
they cultivate—or not quite that;
the corner they hope to get around to—
waits as patiently as Mother,
who taught them at least to decorate:

taped to each desk are photographs
of Colette, or Jung, or Calvin Coolidge
or (since this is a women's college)
torn from the pages of *Vogue* or *Glamour*,
the nameless, suntanned torsos of
young men lying on the sand
who extend another sort of knowledge.

What did I know at twenty-one?
A fair amount, now I come to think;
when you're older, you get innocent
enough to forget the things you knew.
And forget how much some others went through:
a number have lost a parent
or become one—having conceived a child

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they got rid of, or later gave away;
one may already have said the cruelest
thing she will in her life ever say.
And now, what she has to look forward to
is the stubborn progress of the heart
to a place where she'll be sorrier yet.
Or grow religious, and thank God for it.

That's right: some must be at church,
confessing to crimes not yet committed,
or daydreaming, happily or not,
of romance (even the sweetest of
these thoughts are bound to wound us, either
because it's perfect, or because
it wasn't when we thought it was),

and others have resolved to put
their money not on Eros but
on agape, for the foreseeable future.
Henry the Fifth, as a handful have read,
gloated that those who lay abed
in England would hold their manhoods cheap
because they weren't at Agincourt;

if I wouldn't go that far
this morning, I'd wish these women godspeed
across the campus to their carrels,
and to the communal intellect
of individual, troubled souls:
that scrambling after the hope of solace
in some idea no one's yet thought of.

—Mary Jo Salter

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Art

Code name: painting

by Jed Perl

The essence of an art world is its artists, but when an art world is in the end-of-empire state of mind that New York's has been in for the past few years, living artists can turn out to be the last people whom anybody thinks or cares about. Artists—even reasonably well-known artists—report the monumental indifference of art dealers. Curators don't seem to have a clue as to what artists want to see and how best to present it. And critics are mostly preoccupied with strategies for surviving the seasonal inundation of exhibitions. Art professionals are obsessed with what they fancy are the big questions—Are we keeping abreast of Europe? Are auction prices up or down? Will the TV commentators stab the art world in the back?—but aren't these really the least important things imaginable? The art world has lost its connection with the artists and in doing so it has lost its sense of proportion and scale. At the Museum of Modern Art, the curators no longer understand what a museum-goer can take in—the very idea of how a person looks at art and absorbs it has been lost—so great work is presented in absurdly oversized exhibitions, such as last season's Matisse retrospective and this season's Miró. Many commercial galleries have lost the knack for pacing their shows. Few artists can count on a gallery to show their work at regular intervals. One-person shows, when they occur, sometimes go on for inordinately long periods of time, as if the dealer can't think of anything else to exhibit. And all too much contemporary art is presented in crowded group shows, where it's difficult or impossible to assess an individual. As for the art press, it seems to regard writing about individual contemporary artists as a distasteful obligation. Writers get through that as quickly as possible, so that they can move on to what they regard as the real business: reporting on the auctions and the museums and how much money everybody has lost and made.

In this situation in which fewer and fewer people seem to know or care what artists really do, one thing that artists cling to is the thought that they can keep on doing what they do whether or not the wide world gives a damn. There may be almost nobody in the art world who can assess an artist's development, and yet artists keep developing. There is a sense in which a painting or sculpture is only completed when there is an audience that looks at it (an artist who *never* exhibited would not evolve), but a painter or a sculptor can go for long stretches without an audience. We know that it's possible to achieve greatness even if the big art world pays no attention: Cézanne did it. And the fact that the visual artist can carry on in isolation is a very encouraging fact right now, for there is little likelihood that the art world will pay much more attention in the next few years. This hunkered-down climate has become so pervasive that many artists quite naturally feel that it is scarcely worth mentioning; artists take it for granted, and

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when they do allude to it, they often speak in code. The code word one hears used most often is "painting," as in the sentence, a sentence that could as easily be said by a sculptor as a painter, "They don't care about painting anymore." Because this is a code, one doesn't have to explain who "they" are, and it is understood that what one is talking about isn't painting but Painting—structured sight. This includes not only work done in oil and acrylic on canvas and wood; it also includes drawing, some collage, and, in a sense, sculpture, which has at least for the past several hundred years developed closely parallel to painting.

The press releases that I receive from artists and artist-run spaces are full of telegraphic statements about painting. The exhibition of abstract paintings by Thornton Willis at the Andre Zarre Gallery in October was accompanied by a 8½ x 11 inch flyer which quoted the artist as saying: "In the 60's we tried to extend and exceed the boundaries of painting. In the 70's we tried to rescue painting. In the 80's we opened the gates and several reactionary movements abounded under the broad category of neo-expressionism. In the 90's we are once again on a rescue mission." Willis's abstractions are, no doubt about it, an experience for the eye, an experience that is not so much a function of his arrangements of triangular forms as a function of the immediacy which Willis brings to a painted surface. Willis is a veteran of the decades he writes about, and I do not think he would be verbalizing these feelings of his if they were not the feelings of many of the artists around him. Willis was one of ten artists included in "Presence and Absence," an exhibit held in October at Gallery Esvandam. I did not get a chance to see this show, but it was announced by a press release that read in part: "In contrast to political and object oriented art, which has proved to be visually exhausted, this exhibit demonstrates the richness and potential of the medium of painting." I did get to the Painting Center's "Inaugural Show" in September, which included one work apiece by forty-nine artists; the release for that show stated that "painting is visual not literal," and that "the visual experience is alive and vital." "Not literal" is probably not exactly what they meant to say, and "alive and vital" is an awkward variation on "alive and well," but one got the message nonetheless: painting = visual = alive.

The Painting Center (which opened last April but doubtless hoped to generate some media attention by staging an "Inaugural Show" this fall) is a response to the "they" who don't care about painting. The "Inaugural Show" was transparently an attempt to draw attention to this fledgling venture with a roster that mixed work by well-known artists with work by little-known ones; I was glad to see that painters such as Bill Jensen and Paul Resika were willing to take part in this self-evidently underfunded and idealistically ambitious artist-run endeavor. I saw the show on a weekday afternoon, and there were people there (painters, I expect) who were lingering and talking—something that is unusual on a weekday in SoHo. The gallery—a small but pleasantly proportioned place on the second floor at 52 Greene Street—is meant as a haven; but in taking its stand for painting the Painting Center also raises the question of who exactly the "we" and the "they" are, and that's a question that is not, when you come right down to it, so easily answered. In the press release for the "Inaugural Show" a statement is made that may well make one wonder. The Painting Center, it is said, was "organized in response to an urgent need for a venue completely devoted to painting." Reading that, many would respond that most of what is shown in New York City galleries is painting, so what is the urgent need? Well, the answer is that the urgent need isn't for painting but for Painting. There is no lack of objects done in oil or acrylic on pieces of cloth, but there is a lack of powerful manifestations of the culture of painting, which includes everything from Lascaux to Coptic textiles to Piero to Mondrian and can reflect studio practices as various as those of Poussin, Corot, and the Bauhaus. That's a tall order—skeptics will

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find the ambitions of the Painting Center overblown or just plain silly—and in any event the work in the "Inaugural Show" didn't add up to an overwhelming argument for the health of contemporary painting; it was more like a sensible argument. How can a little exhibition space be so damn ambitious? (What has appeared at the Painting Center since the "Inaugural Show" has just been painting, lower-case, as usual.) But then again, one will never find out what's possible if one doesn't try.

It is easy to make light of artists who claim to occupy the high ground (especially if the artists aren't media stars), and there is a large contingent in the art world who will dismiss most talk about painting as the squawking of reactionaries. But the truth is that most of the squawking in the art world comes from the people who will be glad to never see a painting again (or so they say); they're the ones who seem almost unbelievably sure of themselves. Painters mostly appear to be baffled by their increasingly marginal situation. Positive actions such as the founding of the Painting Center are relatively rare; mostly what one feels among painters is a pervasive sense of doubt and worry. Painters may still be in the majority, but they seem to be becoming a silenced majority. Painters who have some measure of art-world success tend to voice their anxieties, if at all, in deep code; they speak with casual irony of an art world gone awry, as if they feared that any more definite statements might result in their being thrown out of the art-world club. And the painters who have achieved less worldly success are often afraid to say anything. It's all they can do to keep up their courage in the studio; in relation to the wider world they take an attitude of stunned submissiveness.

Culture is not a high-efficiency industry. Even in periods of spectacular achievement all kinds of less than glorious work contribute to a climate that apparently makes it possible for some artists to charge through to the heights. What one learns in looking at the great periods is that they are the sum of the contributions of many individuals, individuals who are engaged in a sort of visual debate. (Though of course great paintings create the momentary illusion that they contain everything. But if one artist could contain all of painting, why would there be so many important artists in the museums?) If there is a danger that comes from within the community of artists just now, it is that since painting is felt to be embattled from without there is a tendency to believe that it is best to close down debate. It would be comfortable to believe that there is an essence to painting, and that everybody could focus on that one thing, but there is no essence to painting, there is only the multiplicity of its possibilities, which an artist chooses among, reacts to, extends. Yet an essentialist view of painting is an oldish American obsession; it goes at least as far back as the reduced statements of Rothko, Reinhardt, and Newman; and a kind of essentialist thinking seems to be increasingly popular just now, as if our difficulties in keeping the debate that is painting alive could be resolved by finding its essence. The appeal of the retrospective of paintings by Robert Ryman, currently at the Museum of Modern Art, is in its essentialist pose. Ryman argues that painting is a white brushstroke, but the drift of the show suggests otherwise. When a painter reduces painting to a minimum—in this case, a few brushstrokes—it only suffices insofar as the artist is able to place that extreme reduction in an arresting relation to the everything else that painting is. In the first room of the Ryman show, which includes work from the 1950s, I can feel the narrowness of Ryman's means as something that is interesting because it seems to contain an awareness of roads not taken; but in this show that sense of the limited means as a choice rather than an evasion vanishes pretty quick. When the same choice is made over and over again, gallery after gallery and decade after decade, one is justified in wondering whether it is a choice at all. Ultimately the show is not about an engagement with painting but an attitude toward painting. Attitude is mostly what I see, as well, in the work of Louise

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Fishman, who was one of the better-known artists in the Painting Center's "Inaugural Show," and who recently joined the Robert Miller Gallery, where she exhibited in September and October. Fishman's work is done in paint on canvas, but it has an inert quality that suggests that Fishman expects paint to express itself rather than to enable her to express something. If this is what painting is, I think I'd just as soon look at a Matthew Barney video, thank you very much. Naked bodies on a video monitor are more interesting than these gritty grids of Fishman's. The announcement for the Robert Miller show was a photograph of Fishman in paint-covered clothes, holding one of the tools of her trade; she looked like she was going into battle for painting. This is a cliché view of engagement, yet Fishman is spoken of—and by people who ought to know better—as a real painter.

To the extent that a painting succeeds, it presents an artist's idiosyncratic vantage point on painting culture as a whole. I don't think that Ryman's or Fishman's work would be so esteemed if people had not lost sight of the fact that painting has an infinite capacity to transform itself. One of the most common things one hears from people who want to defend painting—I sense this somewhat at the Painting Center—is that the obvious brushstroke is one of the marks of the true painter, as if the anti-painterliness of Van Eyck, Ingres, and Mondrian were not very much a part of what painting is about. This fall, it was in a context where there seemed to be if anything a distaste for the brushstroke that Trevor Winkfield, one of the more interesting painters working in New York today, exhbited two paintings. "Personal Imagery: Chicago/New York," at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in October, was an attempt to relate the Chicago Funk style for which this gallery is known to the work of New York artists, who in this case included Elizabeth Murray, Jennifer Bartlett, and Chuck Close, among others. The problem with the show was its premise. No imagery, no matter how personal, can carry a painting if it has not been restudied within the disinterested terms of the medium, and for my money Trevor Winkfield was just about the only artist in the show who did that.

Winkfield's paintings are full to the brim with images. In *A Winter World* (1992), by far the strongest of the two included here, there's a grimacing mask and a doll-like figure; a hailstorm of thingamajigs that look like bronze torches with decorative wheels attached to their bases; a window looking out into a calendar-art landscape complete with game birds and a dusting of snow. *A Winter World* is a biggish painting for Winkfield (49 x 56½ inches), and his avalanche of imagery is a lot to take in; yet he paints it all so coolly, almost clinically, that the restraint of his brushwork becomes a sophisticated mediating force—it's as if he invites us to watch the maelstrom through a pocket magnifying glass. Winkfield's flat, posterish colors, especially the broad planes of full-strength red, are an unexpected idea for winter, yet the warm colors are presented so dryly that they evoke a January freeze, or is it the warmth of inside during a January freeze? What does it all mean? Well, for sure it's about inside and outside (the window tells you that), and the idea that outside is less real than inside, and the idea that if outside is a comprehensible banality, inside is our own personal incomprehensible lunacy. Winkfield's project as a painter has to do with making us feel that painting is a peculiar but absorbing activity. Winkfield's is an art of denials: denial of the brushstroke, of the sensuousness of paint, of the sense of atmosphere, of wholeness; but the denials somehow add up to a jolly acceptance of painting as monkey business as usual. An argument can be made that Winkfield's painting is overly artificial. I believe he's a painter who gives one the privilege of disagreeing with him. *A Winter World* comes crashing down on us all at once—an icy world cracking into shards that we grab onto because we can well imagine that beneath the bright iciness there's nothing.

All painting deals in paradox, the fundamental paradox being that the painter endeavors to express a feeling of limitlessness

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through the limited use of painting's unlimited means. In the paintings of Leland Bell—which were seen for the first time since the artist's death in 1991 in a show at the Salander–O'Reilly Galleries in October—a more particular paradox has to do with the artist's attempt to convey an expansive public spirit through a rather severe, essentially abstract kind of form. Among many of Bell's friends the works that have always been most admired are some of the small self-portraits, in which he achieves a penetrating psychological force. But the work with which Bell was most engaged in the later decades of his life—and it's the work that quite rightly dominated this show of paintings from the artist's estate—is about something very different: it's about bigness, fullness. In the front room on the second floor at Salander–O'Reilly (it's the most beautiful room in which Bell's paintings have ever hung in New York) it occurred to me that although Bell was no admirer of Abstract Expressionism, his scenes of family members around a table or of a man and woman together in a bedroom ultimately expressed a desire for all-in-one impact that we associate with Abstract Expressionism. In his pursuit of this idea, Bell went back to the idea of bigness as it had developed in nineteenth-century painting, especially, I think, in Delacroix and Courbet. Bell's later paintings are attempts to give the everyday a heroic dimension through the persuasiveness of form. Bell wanted, more and more as he got older, to find a way to make his paintings speak in grand, general terms. I think he only succeeded totally once, in the large horizontal painting called *Butterfly Group*, with three figures standing behind a table, that was the kingpin of his last show at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery and hangs in the front room at Salander–O'Reilly. (If I am not mistaken, Bell made some changes in the color of the back wall plane after the Schoelkopf show.) Here his black outlines and flat planes of reds and blues have the expansiveness he wanted. If one knows something about Bell, one realizes that it is a portrait of the artist and his family; yet in *Butterfly Group*, private life has been exploded into something strikingly, memorably impersonal. And another paradox: *Butterfly Group*, the final achievement of an artist who was generally viewed as marginal to art in New York, is about the desire for the impersonality of a mainstream tradition.

Bell was the greatest talker about painting that I have known. Like many artists who came of age in New York after World War II, he felt nearly as much affinity for jazz as he did for painting, and he used the language of jazz to describe painting, although in Bell's case the analogy was made with an unusually exact sense of what painting could and could not be expected to do. That is not to say that Bell had any more the complete view of painting than anybody else. Although he was too smart to underestimate the value of the porcelain-smooth surface of an Ingres, I do think that when it came to the work of his contemporaries Bell did not struggle enough against his natural bias toward painterly painting. But for those of us who first heard Bell speak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the rhapsodies that he addressed to the slides of great paintings on the lecture-hall screen had a raw power that stood out even in those years when people talked loudly and passionately about many different things. Looking back on it now, I think that Leland Bell was perhaps the only person I've ever known who never felt the need to speak about painting in code. Bell seemed to live within the wholeness of painting. That, of course, was an illusion that was created not only by his persuasiveness but also by our youth, and yet it was a fine illusion, and it says nothing good about what has happened in the intervening twenty years that nobody could sustain that illusion today. Right now painters are quite understandably having a hard time holding onto the big picture; they're so preoccupied with survival in relation to the art world that they have little energy left over to pay attention to one another. In this end-of-empire period, painting has become a whispered password, but of course it is not enough merely to know the password. The elliptical,

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diffident way in which artists say the password is perhaps their acknowledgment that it is not enough. To keep on painting is to go deeper and deeper into an individual experience. But it also involves becoming more and more aware of oneself in relation to other painters. A painter enriches painting, without which the painter cannot go on.

Exhibition notes

"Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series"
at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
September 23, 1993–January 9, 1994

It isn't every day one sees ambitious narrative painting, not even with the renewed legitimacy this form has enjoyed since the 1980s. Yet that's just what the Phillips Collection now has on view in its show "Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series." The exhibition reunites the cycle of sixty masonite panels painted by Lawrence when he was living in Harlem as a young man in the early 1940s; the captions to the paintings have been revised by the artist. Owned jointly by the Phillips and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the *Migration* series hasn't been exhibited publicly since the 1970s or seen by a wider national audience since the 1940s.

The subject of the cycle is the migration of blacks from the rural south to the industrial north in the aftermath of World War I. Although his family participated in it, Lawrence didn't witness the Great Migration firsthand; he was born in New Jersey in 1917. Therefore the outlines of his story were garnered from books in the Schomburg Collection on 135th Street. Yet nothing is lost by this "historical" approach to the material; in fact, it seems to have worked to his advantage. Like the storyboard of some great documentary film, the cycle describes a broad narrative arc that never loses its forward motion. Lawrence never gets bogged down in detail, either visual or narrative.

Within the broad sweep of the series, Lawrence manages to endow each painting with its own distinct identity and aesthetic impact. Clearly influenced by the Synthetic Cubism of Picasso and by Matisse's broad areas of saturated color, Lawrence uses his rich yet simplified artistic vocabulary both as an expressive end in its own right and as a way of shaping individual narrative episodes for maximum impact on every level. He manifests an artist's eye for color, form, and pictorial organization, a graphic designer's sense of how to make an image "carry," and a storyteller's feel for drama, character, and the telling incident. But anyone expecting mural scale from these narrative paintings will be disappointed. They are small, barely a foot on their longest side, a reflection of both the artist's constrained financial resources and the limited space of his studio.

A sobering postscript to this show is the documentary material that the Phillips, in keeping with recent practice, has chosen to include in the exhibition. It consists of letters between Marjorie Phillips, Edith Halpert, and others expressing admiration for Lawrence's paintings and arranging exhibitions and purchases of his work. It all seems so collegial, so casual, a reminder that the machinery driving the art world was once far simpler, and more concerned with art than with perpetuating its own momentum.

"Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series" was organized by Elizabeth Hutton Turner, associate curator of the Phillips Collection. It will travel to Milwaukee; Portland, Oregon; Birmingham; St. Louis; New York; Atlanta; Denver; and Chicago. A catalogue, with essays by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others, has been published by the Rappahannock Press and the Phillips Collection (172 pages, $40; $25 paper).

—*Eric Gibson*

"American Art in the 20th Century:
Painting and Sculpture, 1913–1993"
at the Royal Academy of Arts, London.
September 16–December 12, 1993

Of the major exhibitions of American art that have been organized abroad over the last four decades—which is to say, since the

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emergence of the New York School ignited European interest in the subject—"American Art in the 20th Century" is by far the worst. As a survey of American painting and sculpture in the period 1913–1993, it is historically inaccurate and intellectually incompetent. It is also philosophically frivolous. It is so badly selected and so poorly installed that its abysmal character has already made the show the season's principal scandal on the London art scene. It is, in a sense, the exhibition that the enemies of American art in London have been waiting for, and they have had a field day with it.

The organizers of the exhibition, Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal, apparently approached their task with the conviction that the most important American artist of the twentieth century is Marcel Duchamp. To buttress this preposterous theory they have elevated such minor figures as Man Ray and John Covert to major status while at the same time completely omitting, among many others, John Marin, Alfred Maurer, Milton Avery, Gaston Lachaise, Elie Nadelman, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Motherwell, Hans Hofmann, Richard Diebenkorn, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Fairfield Porter, Leland Bell, and Philip Pearlstein.

If the omissions were not enough to sink the exhibition as a guide to American art in this century, the selection of even important artists that are in the show is so poor that the difference between being in and not in is not always significant. Stuart Davis, for example, is reduced to a footnote to the Pop Art movement, and poor Mark Rothko is exhibited in so disgraceful an installation that there is no way for a newcomer to his art to discern anything about its special quality. Marsden Hartley is cut off at the World War I period, and by his placement in the exhibition is somehow associated with Duchamp, which he wasn't, while Edward Hopper is made to seem the most important figurative painter during the entire eighty years under review. Much else of importance in American art in the Twenties and Thirties is dropped down the memory hole, and the revival of representational painting in the Sixties and Seventies is reduced to Pop Art and few other fashionable trends.

It is only when one gets to the current scene in the exhibition—which in this case means Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, *et al.*—that one feels that the organizers have worked up a real enthusiasm for their subject, and this section of the show has been relegated to the Saatchi Gallery, in an inconvenient part of London. A lot of this new art, if we may still call it art, has already been seen in London, and that, too, may account for the tendency of the London public not to bother with it this time.

The fact is, Messrs. Joachimides and Rosenthal have shown themselves to be ignorant of the real history of American painting and sculpture in the twentieth century. The caricature of this history which they have mounted at the Royal Academy is more a reflection of current art-market interests than it is a result of the serious study of the subject itself. The show panders to current fashions and overblown reputations, and represents even major artists by works that are, in many cases, unworthy of their names. Even the bogus theory upon which the show has been organized—the Duchamp thesis—pretty much evaporates long before the end of the exhibition is reached.

Almost as repulsive as the exhibition itself, moreover, has been some of the press devoted to it in London. No doubt the most curious review of the show was David Sylvester's in *The London Review of Books*. Sylvester created a scene at the press opening of the show by denouncing the selection and installation. Later he apologized for the scene he had created, and later still returned to the subject in the *London Review* with an article that repeated his original charges. It might have been a good review if Sylvester had left it at that. But then he began listing things he thought should have been in the show—the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton and Dorothea Tanning, for example, and what he called "Land Art." That, too, added a comic touch to this ludicrous event.

—Hilton Kramer

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Theater

Going nowhere

by Donald Lyons

The ways of language are strange. A piece of expressionist, abstract writing—say, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—can become concrete by virtue of the felt life, the dancing mind within the words. A naturalistic play—say, Irish dramatist Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*—can sink under the weight of its own generalizing ambition. Friel's new play, which had a brief Broadway run at the Plymouth recently, was indeed ominously disappointing—ominously because it reinforced vicious tendencies already apparent in the playwright's earlier *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

In *Tennessee* (the title comes from a song lyric) it is a hot August day. Three thirty-something couples are waiting for a ferry boat; they are on a stone pier on the remote coast of Donegal in Ireland. The pier's massive stones, as represented in Joe Vanek's design, evoke an Egyptian tomb minus hieroglyphs or carvings. The people, though garbed in tackily generic holiday wear, are perhaps to be thought of as in some liminal state between life and death.

The organizer of the trip is Terry, an extroverted bookie whose birthday it is. He is with his wife, Berna; Berna's sister Angela and Angela's husband, Frank; his own sister Trish and Trish's husband, George. He is taking them to a fabled offshore island called Oilean Draoichta, which, the saturnine Berna informs us, means Island of Otherness, of Mystery. It was a place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, but Angela, a classics teacher, wonders for no reason if it was in fact sacred to Dionysus. Terry soon announces that he had secretly bought the island four months ago. Angela, pursuing her Dionysiac tack, asks if he means to turn it into "a new venue for rock concerts . . . a hymn to the forces that defy civilization." Much singing goes on in the play, mostly of pop and religious tunes; when the women sing the Marian hymn "Bring Flowers of the Rarest," a man says, "Haven't heard that since I was a child." (Neither, I thought, had I. Friel knows how to push some buttons.) But the play's official musician is George, who was in his youth expected to become Ireland's Rachmaninoff, but who is now all but mute from lung cancer and communicates by means of an accordion.

Twelve hours later, the ferryman, a local geezer named Carlin (= Charon), has not arrived. Berna sinks into gloom, telling her sister (her husband's real love) that "there are times when I feel I'm about to be happy." Cheerful Terry obliviously prattles on about food. These domestic sadnesses and missed connections are ginger-beer Chekhov.

Angela suggests—it is a lazy dramatic contrivance—that they pass the long night by telling stories. George goes first, "telling" his story by playing a bit of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata. Frank, who is by way of being a failed writer, next takes up the slack by retailing some chunks of his Casaubon-like magnum opus, *The Measurement of Time and Its Effect on European*

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Civilization. (It comes out that good-hearted Terry has been supporting Frank's feckless literary career with weekly checks.) Frank tells us at some length about the daily routines of medieval monks, who, by dint of early rising and fasting, were given to apparitions. Terry scoffs, but Frank thinks there may just have been something in it: "maybe, maybe" those monks did glimpse "the inexpressible . . . the ineffable." Friel's wishy-washy tolerance is exactly mirrored in Frank's inertly polysyllabic language.

It's then Berna's turn, and she turns out to be similarly ambivalent about Catholic superstition. She recites the legend of the Virgin Mary's house flying from Nazareth to Loreto in Italy; finding the tale "stupid," she yet admires its message, which she articulates as "Fuck you, reason." It is now dawn, and Berna jumps off the top of the pier into the sea. Intermission.

In the next act, Berna is drying out. Frank regales us with an account of a dolphin dancing with "a deliberate, controlled, exquisite abandon . . . another apparition."

Terry, the central character, now gets to narrate. The five others freeze and listen, rapt—Patrick Mason, who brought some energy to *Lughnasa*, here directs with a paralytic hand. Terry has perhaps been reading Donna Tartt, for it is a grisly tale of Dionysiac human sacrifice that he is telling. Dionysus with a Christian face, to be sure, this being Ireland and all. It seems that around midsummer night in 1932 fourteen local youths were returning from a Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. "Intoxicated" by the frenzied spectacle (which in actual fact could not have amounted to anything more destabilizing than an outdoor Mass and lots of recited rosaries), the group went out to the isle of Oilean Draoichta, where they ritually slew, dismembered, and devoured one of their number. It was all hushed up by the local bishop, who dispatched the cannibalistic thirteen to Australia. Nothing has grown—not a flower—on the accursed isle ever since. Could it be—could it just be—that the Christian Eucharist is a watered-down version of the old Dionysian sparagmos we know and love from Euripides' *Bacchae*? Hmmmm.

Fired up by the Greekness of it all, classicist Angela launches into a lecture about the Eleusinian Mysteries, which also involved some kind of sacrifice. The other five freeze to listen and—I almost said—take notes for the end-of-play quiz.

By now, the dimmest or sleepiest member of the audience—at the Plymouth, not at Eleusis—realizes that the boatman is not coming, not ever. Terry comes out with the uninteresting confession that he has not, in fact, bought the island, that he is indeed broke. He does suggest, however, that they all come back to the pier on the same day next year, on, you will remember, his birthday. Angela finds this idea, on its face absurd, ritually exciting and vows to come back "not in expectation—but to attest, to affirm, to acknowledge—to shout Yes, Yes, Yes." (Who talks like this? Not people. Not gods. Not decently written allegorical personifications.) Dying George asks everyone to come back "in memory of me."

The play's production, with its pharaonic set and friezelike compositions of characters, only emphasized the script's compulsive straining after The Higher Significance, but two performances managed to touch the real. Donal McCann brought a specificity, a vulgarity, and a playfulness to Everyman Terry, sad middle-aged failure. McCann is a wonderful actor, with a Spencer Tracy-like solidity and humanity; he was Gabriel Conroy in John Huston's perfect film of Joyce's "The Dead." And Catherine Byrne as chatterbox classicist Angela keeps us awake through class with her fierce beauty and electric charm. Byrne was the youngest sister in *Lughnasa*.

What seemed an affectation in *Lughnasa*—drab, humdrum lives suddenly transcended by redemptive ritual ecstasy associated with pagan cult—has grown into an addiction in *Wonderful Tennessee*, which seems at moments like a Brian Friel play written by computer. Its six characters in search of a ferry are sketchy pretexts, mere

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occasions for the inevitable Mythical Moment. The *mise en scène*—pier, ferryman, isle of the dead—harks back to old-fashioned dramatic kitsch like *Outward Bound*, wherein all these droopy people are on a foggy boat and do not realize for the longest time that they are, like, *dead*.

But this Myth addiction is really what Friel needs treatment for. In *Lughnasa* at least we got to witness the characters transported; in *Tennessee* we hear book reports about it, climaxing in the leading man's preposterous nonsense about the pale Catholic kids, inflamed by the wild goings-on at a Eucharistic Congress, indulging in a Dionysiac picnic. And he is not the only character in the play to have indigestion from too much exposure to *The Golden Bough* and *Ulysses*, for another one swears ritualistically to repeat the action (you should pardon the expression) of the play every year "Yes, Yes, Yes." And finally a dying character—you know, like Adonis or Jesus—bids the action of the play be repeated "in memory of me."

Back in the 1890s, in the heyday of James Frazer and Gilbert Murray, all this Slaying-of-Year-God, Jesus-as-watered-down-Adonis-cum-Dionysus stuff was audacious and fresh. Comparative mythology was a sassy adolescent tweaking the smug ecclesiastical establishments—and a good thing, too. And great writers like Joyce and Lawrence and Eliot used what comparative mythology had to teach them in the course of their investigations into life. On a lower literary level, comparative mythology fed the faux paganism of Decadents such as Forster (in some of the stories) and Wilder (I am thinking of his novel *The Cabala*) and the weaker, less wonderful side of Tennessee Williams. Friel is not a Decadent; he is, if anything, an heir to the naturalistic strain of *Dubliners*. But he uses Myth with the all-purpose glee of the Decadents, forever buttonholing spectators to whisper the hot flash that Catholicism, scourge of Irish life, is really zippered-up paganism. Alas, it is 1993 and not 1893, and this news is about as exciting as the telephone. What'll he be telling us next—that we are all descended from apes or that we carnally desire our parents or that $E=MC^2$ or that the dictatorship of the proletariat will cure our ailments?

Brian Friel had better leave the library (or at least the Advanced Victorian shelf) and take a look around. Myth is a formula like any other. In art the symbolic should grow, invisibly, from the soil of the real. *Wonderful Tennessee* is a bonsai of a play.

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The media

Leave it to Beavis

by James Bowman

BUTT-HEAD (*to* BEAVIS *as they watch a rock video*): It's that dude, the Grim Rapper. When you see that dude, that means you're going to die.
BEAVIS: Does that mean we're going to die?
BUTT-HEAD: Yeah.
BEAVIS: Cool.

Vladimir and Estragon have nothing on these guys. They are my heroes, the cartoon stars of the show that Dr. Carole Lieberman of the National Coalition on Television Violence calls "a 'Sesame Street' for sociopaths." Although "The Simpsons" and "Roseanne" are still going strong, "Beavis and Butt-head," the top-rated show on MTV, is my new favorite program. But now the two teenage morons are in trouble. All sorts of viewers-with-alarm, from professional prudes like Dr. Lieberman to Senator Fritz Hollings of South Carolina—who just managed to remember that there was something vaguely scandalous about a "Buffcoat and Beaver"—have seized upon them as the synecdoche by which they are enabled to express what it is they don't like about television. For example, *Newsweek*, commenting on a graduate student in mathematics at Berkeley who dropped out to become a writer for "B and B," grandly pronounced: "You can read the entire story of American decline in that one career move."

That is the kind of statement which would have been mercilessly ridiculed if it had come from someone like the late Allan Bloom, but, given the present state of public agitation about the culture, it hardly even seems an eccentric view anymore. Yet few of those who have been incited to public outrage by "Beavis and Butt-head" are much more familiar with the show than Senator Hollings is. What seems to have got them going is the widely reported fact that in Moraine, Ohio, a five-year-old boy called Austin Messner who was playing with a lighter started a fire in his family's house trailer which killed his two-year-old sister. His mother claimed that he had been watching "Beavis and Butt-head," from whom he had learned that fire is, oxymoronically, cool.

Other stories came to light. A parent from Sidney, Ohio, claims that three girls started a fire in their home with an aerosol and a match—one of many tricks that children unusually ill-supplied with naughty friends could have learned from the same show. When a cat in California was killed by someone's putting a firecracker in its arse, Beavis and Butt-head were blamed because they had once talked about doing such a thing. The network responded by moving the 7:00 P.M. installment to 10:30, when five-year-olds are less likely to be watching. Mike Judge, the show's creator, promised henceforth not to represent Beavis and Butt-head as pyromaniacs and has announced that the offending episode, together with several others from the original series, mainly to do with cruelty to animals, will

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not run again. Now, too, every episode comes with a disclaimer: "Beavis and Butthead are not role models. They're not even human. They're cartoons. Some of the things they do would cause a real person to get hurt, expelled, arrested, possibly deported. To put it another way, don't try this at home."

I am sorry to say that it is typical of the entertainment business to go absolutely abject when this sort of thing happens, or is claimed to have happened. In October, there was a rash of incidents involving teenage boys lying down on the center-line of highways to prove their manhood. At least two of them were killed and a couple of others were badly hurt. When it was discovered that there was a sequence in a recent film from Disney called *The Program* in which college football players lie down in the highway, the passage was simply cut out of all twelve hundred extant prints of the film! Of course you can understand the studio's nervousness: here are new worlds to conquer for the litigation industry. In France, in fact, a mother is suing the head of French television because she says her seventeen-year-old son accidentally killed himself with a bomb he had learned how to make from "MacGyver."

But the fact is that it is natural for kids, especially teenage boys, to do cruel and stupid and dangerous things. When I was a teenager, my friends and I used to lie down in the road to see who could be the last one to get up and run as a vehicle approached. We had not seen this done anywhere on television or in the movies but improvised it for ourselves. It now seems a miracle to me that one of us was not killed. We tormented dogs, cats, and younger children; we shot song birds with BB guns and then turned the guns on one another in a "war" that lasted for several hours, remarkably enough, without putting anyone's eye out. Why should Mike Judge be blamed for conveying a true flavor of what white middle-class adolescence is like as part of a popular culture which is designed from top to bottom to appeal to adolescent taste? If the culture is sick, it is not because of "Beavis and Butthead," which is its most perfect expression to date, but because almost nobody in it thinks it worthwhile to produce anything for people with a mental age of more than fourteen.

Even the utilitarians, like George Will, who suppose that gang members in big cities are shooting each other because they've seen it done on TV or in the movies, can be answered thus. They need to give more attention to the healing powers of maturity, which is the cultural equivalent of the absent father so many of them recognize as the best sociological correlate of violent behavior in the young. The problem is that maturity cannot be imposed by any political fiat, and politicians now see the whole issue as a rich seam of electoral ore. The latest of them to take her pick and shovel to it is Janet Reno—who, whatever her limitations as Attorney General, has wit enough to recognize a political sure thing when she sees it. "I don't relish the prospect of Government action," she claims, "but if immediate voluntary steps are not taken and deadlines established, Government should respond, and respond immediately." Examination question: Analyze the use of the words "voluntary" and "respond" in that sentence.

Ms. Reno is the sort of prig who is proud of the fact that her mother would not allow a television in the house when she was growing up "because she said it contributed to mind rot." Now, Senator Paul Simon's deadline for the networks to *do something* having passed unnoticed,[1] the Attorney General has given the networks until the end of the year to figure out a way to flatter her opinions about what children should and should not watch on television or she will seek legislation to provide for warning labels or time restrictions or suchlike footling measures already pending in Congress—or perhaps some more draconian form of censorship dreamed up by herself.

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1 See "The Use and Abuse of Violence" in *The New Criterion* for September.

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Of course the broadcasters and many of their allies have brought it on themselves by cringing with guilt every time some highly visible violence prude like Ms. Reno or Senator Simon complains. Even Jack Valenti, probably the most powerful and effective lobbyist in Washington, truckles to the Reno line:

> The Directors' Guild, the Writers' Guild, the Producers' Guild, and the Actors' Guild, along with the seven major studios and the networks, are joined together now in a continuing effort over the next year to exile gratuitous violence wherever it exists and to try to extract from the screen action sequences that aren't necessary to character and plot development.

To "exile" it? What does that mean? And what happens if the government doesn't agree with the artists' guilds about what is "gratuitous"? That is an artistic judgment in which politicians are, in effect, being invited to participate. And to what end? Does *anybody* suppose that people will stop shooting each other if they are allowed to watch only violence which can be justified by the demands of plot, character, and theme?

If the problem with the culture is its childishness, such solutions as any politician can propose will only make it worse. Instead of being treated like fourteen-year-olds by Hollywood, we will be treated like six-year-olds by Washington. The nanny state is already far too much involved in deciding what we should and should not—if not yet what we can and cannot—watch or read through its allies in the public schools and public broadcasting. More distressing to me than Master Messner burning down his house trailer because of "Beavis and Butthead" was the news that Danielle Suttle, a four-year-old from Toledo, had saved the lives of her parents and her year-old brother because of "Barney & Friends." She woke them when she smelled smoke in the middle of the night because, she said, "Barney says if you smell a fire, you got to go get your mommy." The producers of the PBS series about Barney, a lovable purple dinosaur which even *The New York Times* considers "ugly and sappy," claimed that their mushy little hearts were warmed. I myself felt a chill. Can the day be far away when children's television looks more like "Barney & Friends" and less like "Beavis and Butthead"?

With the help of our wonderful state-run schools, we have already begun abolishing the boundary lines between learning, entertainment, and propaganda. Not long ago, I was driving somewhere with a car full of children and we passed a billboard cigarette advertisement. "See that sign up there?" said my six-year-old son Jack to me, pointing at Old Joe Camel. "That's trying to get kids to smoke." Now it may be that the propaganda he gets at school about smoking was driven home in his case by the fact that Camel is my brand, but it seemed to me remarkably precocious of him to have assimilated the lesson so quickly. It is not, I think, because he is brainwashed but because he is probably already a fair representative of a generation of American youth which may be increasingly illiterate when it comes to old-fashioned ink-on-paper but is learning at ever earlier ages to become media-literate.

I never realized quite what this new media-literacy involves until I took up watching, for a week or so, the favorite cartoon shows of Jack and his seven-year-old brother, Stephen. These appear almost exclusively on the Fox network and are screened between three and five o'clock on weekday afternoons and on Saturday mornings. They include "Tom and Jerry Kids," "Tiny Toons," "Animaniacs," "Batman," "Dog City," "Eek the Cat," and "Taz-mania." They are nearest in spirit to the old Warner Bros. cartoons starring Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, *et al.* But one realizes in the first five minutes that all is transformed. Bugs, Daffy, Elmer Fudd, and Wile E. Coyote actually appear in "Tiny Toons," but as venerable professors at the Acne Looniversity, which is attended by a new generation of articulate animals hoping to learn from such teachers how to become successful cartoon characters.

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Bugs's star pupils are Buster and Babs Bunny, who are drawn like diminutive versions of Bugs himself but with sex-identifying clothes: Babs wears a skirt and little bow ribbons on each of her long ears. In one episode, Babs, while expressing her admiration for Bugs, laments that all their heroes from the old Warner Bros. stable were male and that she has no female "role models." Then she hears a spooky voice, meant to be a parody of the voice in the film *Field of Dreams*, which tells her: "If you watch them, you will find her." Babs not only knows enough to heed the voice, she recognizes its cultural context: "I'm no Kevin Costner," she tells the audience, "but far be it from me to ignore a strange voice from out of nowhere."

And so she watches and she finds—an early cartoon character called Honey who was part of a comedy team called Honey and Bosko. But whatever became of her? Babs, with the help of the voice, determines to find out and uncovers an entire post-stardom history, shot through with old-time cinematic melodrama, from the time when Honey and Bosko were cast in the shadow of Porky Pig's greater celebrity through vaudeville and club dates (with rowdies down in front shouting: "Get out, you has-been. Haven't you ever heard of Technicolor?") to the split-up of the act. There is a coda concerning Bosko's pathetic attempt to go it alone, wherein he is to make a comeback on the Ed Sullivan show but is given the boot when he is unable to produce Honey. Ed growls: "Great! Now all I've got are those mop-top Liverpudlians."

How many five- to ten-year-olds can have a clue as to what a Liverpudlian is, let alone what popular entertainers are associated with the epithet or what's funny about this joke? How many can know who Ed Sullivan was or what vaudeville was when both have been dead for decades? Evidently more than I would have thought. Nor does their sophistication stop there. Babs lures Honey out of retirement by staging a retrospective of her films, though at first she finds it difficult to attract an audience. "As an entrepreneur I stink," she says. But then the voice returns to say: "If you advertise, they will come." So Babs, being the spunky kind of bunny that she is, decides that she is "going to launch the biggest advertising campaign ever! Just look at what it did for *Batman*." She tries a rap number, in authentic dialect, on a street corner (in another espisode, she parodies 2 Live Crew's notorious "Me so horny" by singing "Me so bunny"), but she finally gets her audience, and her "role model," when she heeds the voice one more time: "This is the Nineties. If you want to advertise, you've got to think television."

We have got to think television too. For it will not do to say that this cartoon is just a kind of in-joke, or is like the "Bullwinkle" show of the 1960s in being really written for adults even though brighter children can appreciate it. Like "Bullwinkle," "Tiny Toons" requires in order to be understood an enormous sophistication about popular and political culture—even about language, as in the clever punning of the "Acne Looniversity," which picks up the all-purpose proprietorial trademark in cartoons, Acme, as well as the Loony Toons trademark itself. But, unlike "Bullwinkle," it is not watched by adults. Nor is it an isolated phenomenon. The real "role models" of these cartoon characters may be Rocky and Bullwinkle rather than Bugs and Daffy, but they share their models with the rest of the Fox cartoon line-up—as well as shows like "Ren and Stimpy" that appear on cable or other networks. The "Bullwinkle" style, albeit a less print-literate version of it, is becoming the norm rather than the exception in children's programming.

Consider, for instance, the city pigeons on "Animaniacs" who talk like the characters in *Goodfellas* and finally have to be brought into line by a pigeon doing Marlon Brando doing *The Godfather*. Or the megalomaniac mouse on the same show who decides that becoming a country-music star is the way to achieve his ambition to rule the world and who says, on meeting Dolly Parton, "puberty was inordinately kind to you." Or the appearance of Odin and Thor speaking in

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mock archaisms about whether or not it was wise of father Odin to allow Thor to play with lightning bolts. Or the Tom and Jerry kids parody of "Wheel of Fortune" and other television game shows, or the discussion between Batman and Robin (a film student at Gotham University) about the realism of *It's a Wonderful Life* ("I could never get past the title," says the world-weary Batman), or Eek the Cat and his plump girlfriend Annabelle's singing rock opera to each other, or Ren and Stimpy's sending up television nature shows, or the elaborate recasting of Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade as realized by Humphrey Bogart into Dog City ("S-P-A-Y-E-D/ Bad dogs can't escape from me!") by a couple of Jim Henson puppet dogs playing rival dog-cartoonists.

The relationship between the dog-cartoonists is that of master and pupil. Professor Scratch Macaulay, who talks like Sean Connery, is the creator of Sam Spayed; he has his own strong ideas about the principles of constructing cartoon narrative which are regarded by his pupil, whose own dog-detective is called Ace Hard, as old-fashioned. They compete, sometimes acrimoniously, to impose their methods on the same strip until finally they are enabled with the help of an intervention from a young apprentice to come up with a *modus vivendi* based on balancing between tradition and innovation. The theme of continuity with the past runs through these programs, from the "mentors" of Acne Looniversity to the Batman–Robin relationship, and is not surprising in view of their generally allusive style. Certainly somebody here has a real respect for at least some of the past.

It may be that Fox is only recognizing that among middle-class kids who nowadays spend so many afternoons after school, alone or with a baby sitter, watching television rather than having BB gun wars, the competition for cartoons comes from game shows, soap operas or re-runs, either of syndicated series from the Sixties or Seventies or of old movies. So the newer cartoons all assume a pretty extensive knowledge of all these things. But the clever, ironic use of that knowledge is not so easily explained. It demonstrates, to my surprise, that even children can appreciate the ironic intentions with which the anti-heroic Simpson family, the prime-time jewel in Fox's crown, are played off against television's own expectation of family life derived from the classic sitcom. "The Simpsons" is not *sui generis* but a symptom of the growth of a genuinely popular postmodernism.

By "postmodernism" I mean a disposition rather than a doctrine. The disposition is one of a playful cynicism which at times approaches nihilism; it is ironic, disengaged, allusive, and self-referential, and it achieves its effects by slipping easily into and out of context. Adult shows have been slower to display it than those intended for children, but, besides "The Simpsons," there are clear examples of it in "The Late Show with David Letterman" and in Gary Shandling's parody talk show, "The Larry Sanders Show," on HBO. Alex Ross, in a *New Republic* cover piece called "The Politics of Irony," makes the provocative claim that Rush Limbaugh is a kind of political alter ego of Letterman's. I think this a stretch, but Ross is certainly right to associate the two as pioneers of a new style which the media-literate young are quickest to understand.

As for "the politics of irony," this is increasingly just politics itself, as we could see again in the Great NAFTA Debate between Vice President Gore and Ross Perot on "Larry King Live." It was clear that all three characters (including Larry King) were playing themselves in a specially contrived drama and that the winner was going to be the actor who gave the most convincing impersonation of himself. Ross Perot had his charts and his catch-phrases—including the "giant sucking sound" and "it's just that simple"—but he was a little less good humored than the Ross Perot whose image is stamped on the popular imagination. More importantly, Gore ambushed him by bringing in visual aids of his own while never stepping out of character as Al Gore, the stiff and over-earnest honor-roll student

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who has never in his life smoked a cigarette or gone to bed without pajamas. Gore got the Oscar. "And to think," as a friend of mine said, "that the future of the world's international trading arrangements is being decided on the basis of *this*!"

We'd better get used to it. It is one of the consequences of our long attachment to a childish culture as well as of the nature of television itself that dignity and gravitas have finally vanished from public life. It seems to me quite possible that Ronald Reagan may be the last president whom his fellow citizens do not get to see in jogging togs. The Princess of Wales has already been photographed in so many un-regal positions that one suspects her protests upon publication in *The Sunday Mirror* of surreptitiously taken photos of her exercising to have been principally motivated by the fact that she did not look so good in them as she is used to looking when she has time to pose for a casual shot. Those vile adolescent voyeurs, Beavis and Butt-head, speak on behalf of the arrested development of our whole culture which demands such images. It is unthinkable that they should ever be taken off the air.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Constantine Cavafy *by Joseph Epstein*
Beerbohm the parodist *by John Gross*
Karen Armstrong's "History of God" *by Marc M. Arkin*
Nancy Mitford in her letters *by Brooke Allen*
Iris Murdoch's "The Green Knight" *by Alan Rutenberg*
At the Morandi museum *by Karen Wilkin*
Walter de la Mare *by Michael Glover*

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Books

Relics

by George Sim Johnston

Saints are the undiscovered dark matter of Western history. Just as the distribution of the galaxies does not currently make sense without the assumption of great hidden fields of gravity, so the past two millennia don't quite add up without taking into account the lives of canonized saints who are all but invisible to the post-Enlightenment historian. There are, of course, a handful of saints like Augustine and Francis whose impact on the mind of the West is impossible to ignore. But for the average historian, the rest of the canon of saints simply does not exist. Historians are as subject to fashion as anyone, and after Gibbon's finely turned sarcasms about the austerities of St. Simeon Stylites and the other desert fathers it became a trifle gauche to regard a saint as anything but a passing oddity.

As a result, modern accounts of the past two thousand years of Western history suffer from significant gaps of appreciation. The secularized intellectual can only regard as perverse or paradoxical the claim by Christopher Dawson that St. Boniface (675–754) "had a deeper influence on the history of Europe than any Englishman who ever lived." And yet Dawson has no trouble making the case that this is strictly and literally true. As one of the chief architects of medieval Christendom, especially through his missionary work, which brought much of Germany and the Netherlands into the Christian fold, Boniface had an incalculable effect on subsequent history. To paraphrase Céline, had the conversion of the German tribes not taken place, or even taken place a few centuries later, the Chinese would be the ones taking inventory now.

But the modern mind prefers to regard the emergence of Europe from the anarchy of the dying antique world as a happy random occurrence. This allows it to ignore the labors of Boniface, Gregory, Benedict, and the other early medieval saints who largely made it possible. There are certain historical phenomena which, like the prosperity of the Reagan years, cannot be attributed to any human agency, because the only parties who can plausibly claim credit are held to be beyond the pale. But for several hundred critical years, people whom the Catholic Church later deemed canonizable were among the primary catalysts of European history.

Not only did many saints play important public roles, but their posthumous cults had a deep influence on the formation of Western culture. As Peter Brown has shown in an excellent monograph on the subject, the Mediterranean landscape of late antiquity was a veritable grid of shrines and pilgrim routes dedicated to the saints. Just as American children were once taught virtue by being told about George Washington and the cherry tree, so the medieval mind was nurtured on stories about the saints which did not always observe strict boundaries between fact and legend.

The most popular collection of these

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stories during the Middle Ages was the *Legenda Sanctorum*—literally, "Readings on the Saints"—compiled by a Dominican named Jacobus de Voragine around the year 1260. The book was so popular that it came to be called *Legenda Aurea*, or *The Golden Legend*, because it was said to be worth its weight in gold. Like much else in medieval Europe, the 182 readings that make up the hefty volume are organized around the Church's liturgical year. William Granger Ryan, who published an abridged translation of the book fifty years ago, has now finished the job, producing the first complete *Golden Legend* in English.[1] He has forgone the heavy textual apparatus that usually accompanies such a project. Rather than sorting, sifting, and collating, he has simply given us two handsome volumes to be read and consulted, perhaps while puzzling over the contents of some medieval bas-relief or stained-glass window.

As a work of history, *The Golden Legend* is often dubious, to say the least. Even readers who accept the possibility of miracles will have difficulty with any number of episodes. The fossil record, so far as I know, contains no poison-breathing dragons, and yet Jacobus is not about to give his medieval audience a St. George without one. But historiographical problems aside, *The Golden Legend* is an unequaled source book for the study of the art and literature of the high Middle Ages. And if we consider what it was meant to be, a book of devotion to be read aloud to an illiterate populace, it must be considered a great literary success. Even the modern reader will find it entertaining—and perhaps something more than that.

Before St. Martin of Tours (*c.* 316–397), the principle founder of monasticism in Gaul, all the saints canonized by the Catholic Church were martyrs. So, not surprisingly, much of *The Golden Legend* is a catalogue of brutal endings, many of them quite historical. Lawrence is roasted on a grill, Peter and Andrew are hung on crosses, Boniface is slashed with hooks until the bones show and then molten lead is poured down his mouth. And the women (feminists take note) get fully equal treatment from the pagan authorities. Once martyred, the remains of these Christians become prize possessions of the faithful, and Jacobus gives us page after page of miracles occurring at their tombs.

To the secular mind, the willingness of the early Christians to suffer horribly rather than sprinkle a little incense before the statue of a pagan god (usually the emperor) is quite incomprehensible. A teacher—excuse me, facilitator—of a modern "values clarification" course, in which school children are taught to equate feelings with values, would have no problem getting his class to opt for the incense. But for the early martyrs, to consent to an untruth which touched the deepest core of their being was to lose essentially everything. It is an attitude that is no longer understood, except perhaps in a purely political context.

But the situation of Christians under Diocletian was no different from that of dissidents under Hitler or Stalin. In Heva Beller's recent documentary film about German resistance to Hitler, there is a paradigmatic moment that any number of early Christians must have lived through; it occurs when a father says to his son, an army officer considering a suicide mission to assassinate Hitler: "A man who doesn't take such a chance will never be happy again in his life."

Saints who avoid martyrdom (and the Church has always insisted that it ought to be avoided, if possible) hardly have an easier time of it in the pages of *The Golden Legend*. The lives which ring true often bring to mind Goethe's dictum that the work of this world is done by those who are not entirely well. Consider, for example, Pope St. Gregory (*c.* 540–604), the last great writer to speak and write Latin as his native tongue. At a time when he was administering the universal Church, directing innumerable missions, reforming the liturgy, writing

1 *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, by Jacobus de Voragine, translated from the Latin by William Granger Ryan. Vol. I, 391 pages; Vol. II, 400 pages. Princeton University Press, $49.50 each.

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thousands of pages of sermons and letters, and almost single-handedly preserving Rome and much of Italy from the rapacities of the Lombards, Gregory, according to Jacobus, "was constantly struggling with fevers or coping with gout or shaking with severe pains or racked with excruciating stomach cramps." The other saints in *The Golden Legend* who aren't immediately dispatched by the authorities also seem to get an incredible amount done while operating on one cylinder. The lesson, of course, for Jacobus's devout audience was the efficacy of the grace which comes from a total abandonment to God.

The abandonment of the saints, which is the point of almost every page of *The Golden Legend*, is a stumbling block for the modern reader. There is, as Cordelia reminds Charles Ryder during their stroll around Brideshead, no holiness without suffering. This is a very old idea, but one that's not likely to resonate for a modern therapeutic culture which sees no intrinsic value in suffering at all. The philosopher Josef Pieper has nonetheless made the case that, even on a purely psychological level, the renunciations of the saints might actually have put them ahead of the game when it comes to "self-realization," that hobgoblin of the modern mind. All neuroses, Pieper observes, seem to involve "a tense and self-centered concern for security, an inability to 'let go.' . . . It is significant and by no means accidental that modern psychology often quotes the Scriptural words: 'He who loves his life will lose it.'"

In any event, genuine cheerfulness and the absence of neurotic anxiety, which Gregory himself called tell-tale signs of sanctity, is to be found on every page of Jacobus, especially in the often comic exchanges between Christians who are being slowly tortured to death and the exasperated pagan authorities who show no mixed emotions about what they are doing. The best quip probably belongs to Lawrence on the grill, who told his executioners that he was well-done on one side and ought to be turned over.

Readers who don't buy Jacobus's spiritual messages may still be intrigued by the stories he has to tell about many characters in the New Testament. There is no figure in literature made so vivid in so few words as is the Pontius Pilate of the gospels. What became of this temporizing career official after he washed his hands in front of the multitude and sent Jesus to Calvary is an irresistible historical conundrum about which a number of writers, including Anatole France, have speculated. In the manner of modern meta-fiction, *The Golden Legend* gives two endings for Pilate, both of which are ascribed to tradition. In one, Pilate enrages the emperor Tiberius, who throws him into a dungeon in Rome, where he kills himself; in the other, the Jews of Palestine get mad at Pilate and persuade Tiberius to send him into exile to his native Lyons, where we may imagine him spending morose afternoons in the baths, little suspecting that his name would be in a prayer recited countless times each day for millennia.

All the saints covered by Jacobus are "official" in that they were canonized by the Church. People of culture often have odd ideas about the meaning and purpose of this procedure. A canonization is not a posthumous promotion, nor is it a reward for toeing a certain ecclesiastical "line." Rather it is a solemn announcement after an exhaustive investigation that an individual led a life, not only of heroic virtue, but of a paradigmatic holiness that is recommended to the faithful. As for the common notion that Catholics "worship" the saints, we may turn to Dr. Johnson to correct any misconceptions: "Sir, they do not worship the saints; they invoke them; they only ask their prayers."

The frustrating thing about *The Golden Legend* is that it's impossible to separate myth from history. At times, the author seems to be diligently weighing various sources in order to give the reader the straight story. Many of the biographies, like that of St. Ambrose, seem quite authentic. At other times he exhibits the sort of credulity on which skeptics who think that Christianity is

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a pile of superstitions are quick to make their case. But Jacobus would probably have been the first to admit that he wasn't writing anything like our modern history books, which, in any event, are often skewed by less forthright agendas. In *The Golden Legend* he showed himself to be a narrative artist of the first rank, and in Ryan's fine English version we have a splendid volume that can take its place somewhere between Butler's *Lives of the Saints* and Aesop's *Fables*.

The book of winter

John Haines The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer: Collected Poems. Graywolf, 251 pages, $25

reviewed by Robert Richman

John Haines is a member of the enormously gifted generation of American poets born in the 1920s, the generation of Louis Simpson, Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, Donald Hall, and the late Howard Nemerov. Like many of these poets, Haines served in World War II. But in 1947, after a brief stint at art school, Haines did something few of his peers ever dreamed of doing: he homesteaded in an isolated region of Alaska, about seventy miles southeast of Fairbanks. He built a cabin, trained animals for work, and learned to weave, trap, and shoot. He was there over twenty years, mostly on his own. (Haines still spends part of each year in Alaska.) In his 1989 memoir, *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, Haines writes about the difficulty of living off such barren land:

> No one comes here now . . . once, three years ago, two men came from Banner Creek, two miles over the hill. They cleared a small piece of ground on the beach above the creek, but they found nothing there and did not come back. I am glad of that.

Haines thought Alaska would provide the solitude necessary to write poems, but evidently survival proved to be a more urgent matter. It wasn't until he was forty-two that his first book, *Winter News* (1966), was published.

Looking through *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*, which brings together new and uncollected poems and work from Haines's eight previous volumes, one finds numerous depictions of the remorseless Alaskan landscape and those inhabiting it. In "Stampede," Haines writes about "cold, bearded men"

> laboring through the winter night.
> They climb the drifts
> of a windy, starlit pass
> with iron sleighs, and rough dogs
> whining in harness.
>
> Behind them, ships shrouded
> in smoke and steam
> unload by the light of bonfires.
> Mingled with heavy thuds
> and the creak of straining tackle,
> ghostly voices float slowly upward,
> whitening in the cold night air.
>
> Beyond the pass, small boats
> lie on the shore of a lake,
> half-filled with snow, their thin
> sails stiff with ice.
> The boatmen are fast asleep,
> wrapped in furs and frozen sweat,
> dreaming of gold
> and the white land of promise.

Such poems confirm the view of Haines as a regional poet. And yet, for all of Haines's marvelous depictions of the Alaskan wilderness—and the images of the boatmen, "wrapped in furs and frozen sweat," dreaming of "the white land of promise," really do evoke the place—he is one of the most unregional of regional poets. For one thing, many of Haines's poems are geographically unspecific. For every poem in which the roads of Alaska are named, there is one in which the roads Haines mentions could be anywhere. In "What Is Life?," the poet's roads are more felt than seen: "There are no roads / but the paths we make / through sleep and darkness."

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Then, too, Haines often directs his glance inward, toward the landscape of dreams and memories. In "Southwind" he "dream[s] of horses in the night," while in "Skagway" he depicts a dream about marriage and domestic life. "The trails I made led outward into the hills and swamps, but they led inward also"—this remark, from *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, could be Haines's poetic credo. When he writes of "Moons like eyes turned inward," one can't help thinking of Haines's own inward-turning eyes. Indeed, the cold, silent, unyielding landscape sometimes seems to assist in the poet's shift to the dreamy precincts within.

But even when Haines confines himself to the visible world, he often does so because he finds in it images of himself and of his own wishes and desires: "On the changing features of the landscape I seemed to see written my own signature of use," he writes in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*. The wish to bring something of himself to the world he sees, rather than simply replicating it or reproducing it, makes Haines in his nature poems more the poetic kin of Wordsworth and Robert Frost than of a narrower regionalist such as Wendell Berry.

Haines often seems to see the world as a text with which he has an almost literary encounter. Early on in *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire*, for example, he refers to the snow as "the book of winter," written in a "shadow language," a "thousand-year text to be read by a people hunting these hills in a distant time." In "Hunger," he seeks "To read the soil, / a warning written in the rocks, / and formed in a book / of my own making . . ." And in "Rain Country," he "write[s] this down / in the brown ink of leaves, / of the changed pastoral / deepening to mist on my page." In the end, Haines's trope of the land as a book to be read signals his wish to leave his mark on reality.

Haines's bookishness sets him apart from many so-called regional poets, who are typically anti-intellectual and would never dream of according books and writing the importance in their poems that Haines does in his. Haines not only uses reading and books as images but sometimes writes poems based on his reading. (Dante, Wordsworth, and Jacob Burckhardt are among the writers mentioned in notes and epigraphs.) An even greater percentage of Haines's poems are inspired by works of art. The notes to the book's last section alone contain references to Goya, Michelangelo, Marsden Hartley, David Smith, Auguste Rodin, and Hieronymus Bosch. Haines is one nature poet who is willing to range beyond the wilderness in search of the language, imagery, and inspiration for poems.

Haines is also distinguished by a powerful imagination. In "The Sudden Spring," just when we think we are in for a more or less straightforward account of the season, the poet goes off in another, unanticipated direction:

> The coyote had just spoken
> and lay down to rest in a snowdrift.
>
> March, like a fly awakened too early,
> droned between somnolence
> and a furious boredom.
>
> No one remembered the autumnal
> prophet, teller of drowsy stories
> to be continued . . .
>
> Winter, the unfinished, the abandoned,
> slumped like a mourner
> between two weeping candles.

Sometimes Haines sounds the anti-city, anti-civilization note we associate with the politically correct regionalists—"This is the country we knew / before the cities came," and "forest after forest / stripped for paper cartons," etc.—but this is rare, and confined mainly to the work of one period. Also confined to one period—the late 1960s and early 1970s, when *The Stone Harp* was published—are poems that deal with national and international political events. These, one is thankful, are also relatively few in number. More common is the intensely subjective poem that would appear to be the polar

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opposite of the I-hate-loggers, I-hate-the-metropolis poems. (For what it's worth, Haines is refreshingly unapologetic about hunting.) These subjective poems are often difficult, but not wildly so, and altogether worthy of the demands they make on our attention. For in them one finds the expression of the private, almost trance-like states of mind Haines is so keen on imparting:

> In the quiet house
> a lamp is burning
> where the book of autumn
> lies open on a table.
>
> There is tea with milk
> in heavy mugs,
> brown raisin cake, and thoughts
> that stir the heart
> with the promises of death.
>
> We sit without words,
> gazing past the limit
> of fire into the towering
> darkness. . . .
>
> There are silences so deep
> you can hear
> the journeys of the soul,
> enormous footsteps
> downward in a freezing earth.
> ("Listening in October")

And:

> We still go about our lives
> in shadow, pouring the white cup full
> with a hand half in darkness.
>
> Paring potatoes, our heads
> bent over a dream—
> glazed windows through which
> the long, yellow sundown looks.
>
> By candle or firelight
> your face still holds
> a mystery that once
> filled caves with the color
> of unforgettable beasts.
> ("A Winter Light")

Perhaps the best place to find traces of Haines's internal self is in the music of the poems. Haines's dexterous orchestration of tones, syllables, and sounds provides a more precise sense of his aesthetically rigorous sensibility than do any direct statements in the poems:

> Whether we fall asleep under the moon
> like gypsies, with silver coins
> in our pockets, or crawl deep
> into a cave through which the warm,
> furry bats go grinning and flying,
> or put on a great black coat
> and simply ride away into the darkness,
>
> we become at last like trees
> who stand within themselves, thinking.
>
> And when we awake—if we do—
> we come back bringing the images
> of a lonely childhood: the hands
> we held, the threads we unwound
> from the shadows beneath us;
> and sounds as of voices in another room
> where some part of our life
> was being prepared—near which we lay,
> waiting for our life to begin.
> ("Sleep")

Among poets of his generation, Haines has an ear second only to Louis Simpson's.

Recently Haines has written a number of longer poems that exhibit the same scrupulous attention to sound and meter that is the main strength of the shorter poems. Because these longer poems are extended meditations rather than full-fledged narratives with discernible plot-lines, Haines probably had little difficulty sustaining the dream-like subjectivity that is his trademark.

"Death and the Miser," Haines's six-page meditation on avarice and closefistedness, is perhaps the best of these recent longer poems. Here are the poem's first two, and final two, stanzas:

> God surely sees us,
> for He sends His messengers

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when we lie dying,
tugging in a repentant fever
the gold seams of a shroud.

Remember, if you can,
in your drenched delirium,
the pinched rancor of the hours
spent sorting and weighing:
the squint, the measuring grasp
fastened on dust, flake and coin.

. . .

And deeper still as you go,
on every side
now rise before you
and fall away,
the round and rolling
shapes of gigantic coins,
tall keys with eyes
giving off sparks in the gloom . . .

These, and the ringing,
metallic shadows of Death,
who is himself a miser—
once he has taken,
he never gives anything back.

Ample, discursive, intellectually challenging poems such as "Death and the Miser" make Haines's *oeuvre* more robust.

Next to the mystery of landscape—landscape imagined as well as perceived—Haines's favorite theme is the mystery at the heart of existence. Thus in "The Tree" he writes that "In the quiet grain of your / thoughts the inner life / of the forest stirs / like a secret still to be named." Nature only half yields its mystery to the inquiring poet: "But however close that familiarity, something is always withheld; the life of the animal remains other and beyond, never completely yielding all that is." And again: "In this world we think we know, / something will always / be hidden." There is a delicate lyric beauty in Haines's meditation on ultimate inaccessibility: "We still go about our lives / in shadow," Haines writes in "A Winter Light," "pouring the white cup full / with a hand half in darkness."

To acknowledge the perpetual elusiveness of nature is to acknowledge nature's magnificent autonomy. To leave aspects of reality unexplained and unnamed is the first step toward admitting its power and inviolability. This is the point from which all nature poets begin. But Haines goes beyond this indispensable regard for reality by transforming it according to his own appetites and passions. He does so with an ear meticulously tuned to the texture of experience.

The sage of Slabsides

Edward Kanze
The World of John Burroughs.
Abrams, 160 pages, $45

reviewed by Guy Davenport

John Burroughs (1837–1921), an essayist who wrote about the Catskills, where he was born and spent almost all of his life, is about as forgotten as a writer can be and still elicit a coffee-table book, lavishly illustrated, about his life and times. He is thoroughly presentable. He knew Walt Whitman (and supplied the hermit thrush in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"). His friends included Teddy Roosevelt, Thomas Edison, John Muir, Henry Ford (who gave him two T-models), Harvey Firestone, and Emerson. Contemporary critical opinion preferred him to Thoreau. He became a venerable sage who took children and Vassar girls on nature walks.

He was a writer of much charm and substance. I bought his complete works (the Wake-Robin edition, in twenty-four volumes) forty years ago, with all of its pages uncut. Whether I have yet read all of him, I can't say, as he is a writer one can read as the whim arises. His prose is easy and congenial, and is always interesting, as it is derived from observation of birds (he was a better ornithologist than Thoreau), squirrels, chipmunks, insects, and the seasons. Any page of Burroughs is almost as good as a walk in the

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woods. It was Whitman who suggested that he devote his life to exact observation and to writing in plain prose.

His one messy book was his *Walt Whitman* (1867), a work with some worthwhile information in it but which repeats, like a stuck phonograph record, that Whitman was a cosmic poet. Much as Burroughs admired Whitman, he was nevertheless embarrassed by him ("he kissed me like a girl") and was utterly unprepared to discuss the poetry critically or the ideas analytically.

Burroughs had an intellect of the middle order, neither brilliant nor dull. His defense of evolution as a kind of religion holds up as an argument, and his search for an intelligence in nature (the cunning of a tendril, the ability of a leaning tree to right itself with strategic roots, the migration of birds and butterflies) transcends amateurishness. He is never a crank, and rarely a scold. It is because he sounds today like an ecological prophet that he is worth resuscitating. He has always been worth reading. Writing for magazines taught him how to shape an essay, and he never forgot Whitman's rule that a fact accurately observed is worth any amount of opinion.

Edward Kanze's biography is a well-intentioned effort of a fairly competent writer. It flows in and around photographs that vie for our attention, both old black-and-white ones (the heart-breaking portrait of the unhappy Ursula Burroughs on page 116 and the picture facing it, of the patriarchal Burroughs with two dogs, are images that no writer could hope to compete with) and splendid new color ones. Most of the latter are by Kanze himself, and perhaps we should graciously accept this very attractive book as an album of his beautiful pictures of animals, birds, flowers, and places.

Kanze gives an engaging account of Burroughs's childhood on a dairy farm, his sparse schooling, his early marriage, his arrival in Washington, D.C. And then everything seems to go haywire. The narrative begins to display awkward gaps. It is not explained how Burroughs, who has been a one-room school teacher in rural areas, is suddenly qualified to be a clerk in the U.S. Treasury. Even more mysterious is Burroughs's taking a job as "receiver of a failed bank in Middletown, New York." What this job is, and what it entailed in office hours and expertise, we are not told.

Moreover, Burroughs spent a dozen years at "bank-receiving," building a lovely house named Riverby out from West Park, traveling to England, writing four books. During these years he wrote the essays collected in *Winter Sunshine* (1875) and made a baby on the serving girl. This child—his son, Julian—he then adopted from an orphanage in a kind of scam. Ursula Burroughs, who seems to have been unhappy throughout the marriage, did not learn of this deceit until years later, and was plunged into misery by the revelation. Only toward the end of their lives were Burroughs and his wife reconciled. But by then he had struck up a companionship with Dr. Clara Barrus, a psychiatrist. He was crossing the continent with her when he died in his Pullman berth. His last words were, "How near home are we?"

This biography will be read (and reviewed) by people who are ignorant of Burroughs's writing. His books are in some libraries, and I've heard a rumor that Penguin is to bring out a selection in their nature series. Were Burroughs a writer I had not encountered before, I'm certain I would be grateful for this biography, and my curiosity aroused. But he is a writer whom I count as an old friend, one who, like Montaigne, Burton, or Stevenson, is reliably interesting on any page I open to.

A biography, and especially a literary biography, has the distressing power to displace and confuse its subject's significance. The words "John Burroughs" refer both to a body of essays (in which ample biographical information is included) and to the man who wrote them. Each is at the mercy of different perspectives. The man in Clara Barrus's *Life and Letters* (1925) is not Kanze's Burroughs. A life is mutable in a way the work is not. It would take an Edith Whar-

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ton to trace Burroughs's emotional life, which seems to be as dark as Ethan Frome's, and another kind of writer altogether to see into Burroughs's friendship with Walt Whitman. What we have, despite Kanze's honest efforts, is a tangle of anecdote and rumor. Kanze is himself a naturalist, trained as a geographer, whose initial, mild interest in Burroughs grew into a lively enthusiasm. He has given us a delightful picture book (printed in Japan and botched in places by computer technology—the beginning of the rump of a sentence on page 135, "began to fail," is still on a floppy disc in Kyoto). His photograph of Burroughs's studio Slabsides across pages 84 and 85 is a far more welcome and meaningful interpretation of Burroughs's prose than anything in his text.

When we have a general overview of American writing about nature, both scientific and literary—an overview including Sereno Watson, Clarence King, Louis Agassiz, John Muir, and all the others (our best living practitioner being Edward Hoagland)—we will have a context in which to see Burroughs. He is a very different kind of writer from Thoreau; he was, as he himself said, closer to Gilbert White of Selbourne. In his writing we find that miracle of a true culture, the minor talent shaped to all the perfection it is capable of and therefore radically original. At his most engaging, Burroughs is a little like John Clare in England, spiky and rough but entirely himself.

Kanze breezily informs us that Burroughs "authored a biography of John James Audubon, edited a volume of English and American nature poetry, and penned a slender volume describing his 1903 adventures with President Roosevelt in Yellowstone." Except for a brief dismissal of the *Audubon* as a "lackluster effort," that's all he has to say about these three books. This is pointing, not writing. Even in the short-shrift economy that Kanze allows himself, we feel that a great deal of Burroughs is being denied us by a lack of curiosity that's ruinous to good biography.

Smug syndicate

Sarah Bradford
Splendours and Miseries:
A Life of Sacheverell Sitwell.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 486 pages, $35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

A most effective way to enhance one's literary reputation is to form or join a group. The Imagists, the Lost Generation, the Bloomsburys, the Pylon poets, the Movement, the Beats, and the Angry Young Men all trawled up minor talents along with the great. A lone impressive author like J. F. Powers, who depends for recognition purely on literary merit and lives an isolated life in rural Minnesota, is much less likely to be noticed. Sacheverell—the weakest leg of the Sitwell tripod—would be virtually forgotten without the sturdy support of his siblings.

Two lives of Edith and three books on the Sitwells (by R. L. Mégroz, John Lehmann, and John Pearson) have already been published. Though Osbert and Edith were better writers and more colorful personalities, Sachie deserves and at last has gotten his own biography, one that properly differentiates him from his brother and sister. Unlike the homosexual Osbert and the frustrated, essentially asexual Edith, Sachie married and had two sons. This shy younger brother, who shared many of the quintessential Sitwellian faults, was less eager to seize the limelight and stir up controversy.

Sarah Bradford writes that "the Sitwells made good copy: they were unconventional aristocrats; they were physically outstanding, all being six foot or more; and there were three of them. They were bold and, in the dandy tradition, invited trouble from the mob. [In the 1920s] they brought colour to a drab post-war world." Well aware of Sachie's limitations, Bradford does not (as Diane Middlebrook did with Anne Sexton) make the fatal error of overestimating her subject. She acknowledges Sachie's parasitic patronage of greater artists like Wyndham Lewis and the composer William Walton; his

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pathological egotism and his slapdash, rambling hackwork; "his tendency to write with a total disregard for his readers, his occasional stilted phraseology, and his fondness for reeling off long lists of names of plants and birds." Sachie was, from an early age, a precious, mannered, self-indulgent aesthete—suffused with unearned self-pity.

The most vitriolic indictment of the Gang of Three is the long chapter "Lord Osmund's Lenten Party" in Wyndham Lewis's *The Apes of God* (1930). Lewis was infuriated by the way the Sitwells used fashionable drawing rooms and the popular press to advertise themselves and inflate their minor talents into great reputations. His massive satire exposes their ancestor worship, pomposity, snobbery, arrogance, bad taste, and narcissistic self-admiration. Two years later, F. R. Leavis dismissed the Sitwells as belonging "to the history of publicity rather than poetry." In 1977, nearly fifty years after Lewis's book was published, Sachie wrote me furious letters about the devastating effect of Lewis's unexpected onslaught: "There was no reason except envy or malice for Lewis suddenly writing that time-bomb against us. He was a dangerous, unpleasant man with a touch of genius. We had the impression he was a friend until he tried to deliver this death blow." The worst thing about the Sitwells was not that they were fake, but that they were real.

Sarah Bradford—an Englishwoman who has written heterogeneous books on port, Portugal, Cesare Borgia, Disraeli, Grace Kelly, and King George VI—has done extensive research, is thorough and accurate, has a good grasp of the social and literary milieu, and writes in a lively and often witty style that is a welcome relief from the leaden prose of most American biographies. But she relies too heavily on diaries and letters, and tends to burden the reader with superfluous details: tedious itineraries, lists of social engagements, catalogues of rich and titled party guests. There is no point in putting a distracting "[*sic*]" after minor slips of the pen: much better to make silent corrections. The long quotations need more analysis; and the book would be strengthened by more explanation of motives, as when she perceptively writes of the younger Sitwells: "The necessity of pitting their wills and their wits against their father had bound them together in a common cause. His death and its consequences shattered that unity, reactivating old sibling rivalry which hitherto had been subconscious and causing a rift which never healed but deepened over the years."

Their father, Sir George Sitwell, the fourth baronet, owned a four-hundred-year-old mansion, Renishaw Hall, near Sheffield. This stately pile—a model for Wragby Hall in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—resembled Poe's sinister and oppressive House of Usher and was placed incongruously amidst the grim Derbyshire collieries: "Sir George had planted trees to screen the pitheads and smoke-stacks from view, but had not entirely succeeded; after dark a host of fiery points of light winked or glowed among the branches." Sachie, who was born in Scarborough on the North Yorkshire coast in 1897 and derived his name from the Norman French *saut de chevreuil* (stag's leap), inherited his father's love of art, sightseeing, and travel but very little of his property or money.

Sachie's mother, Lady Ida, the daughter of the second Lord Londesborough, was "beautiful, charming, empty-headed, ill-educated, pleasure-loving and easily bored." In her father's luxurious but philistine house, writes Bradford, with effective concision, "the women spent their time changing their clothes in the intervals between the vast and interminable meals, while the men slaughtered everything that moved in the surrounding countryside." As a child Sachie had a few brushes with royalty, and once blotted his copybook by spilling lemonade into Queen Alexandra's black silk ear trumpet. He was sent to Eton, that penitential forcing-house of English talent; and, though he hated it, forced his oldest son to go there.

Sir George and Lady Ida had nothing at

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all in common, led separate lives, and eventually retreated into eccentricity and alcohol. In 1909, Sir George accidentally discovered near Florence a vast, crumbling, medieval castle called Montegufoni (the hill of the screech owls); he bought it for £4,000 and devoted the rest of his life to restoring and furnishing it. D. H. Lawrence, who lived simply among the peasants in Italy, visited the castle in 1926. He captured its strange atmosphere in an amusing and mischievous letter (not quoted by Bradford): "Sir George collects *beds* . . . as if he were providing for all the dead . . . those four-poster golden Venetian monsters that look like Mexican high-altars. Room after room, nothing but bed after bed. I said 'but do you put your guests in them?'—Oh! he said. They're not to sleep in. They're museum pieces. Also gilt and wiggly-carved chairs. I sat on one. Oh! he said. Those chairs are not to sit in!—So I wiggled on the seat in the hopes that it would come to pieces."

The children disliked their selfish and censorious father, who always delighted in keeping them from pleasurable experiences. He fought tenaciously to reduce their extravagance while providing them with notable examples of his own. Their equally extravagant mother, who came under the influence of a swindler, was induced to commit fraud to secure money for her debts. In 1915, while the sensitive Sachie suffered tortures at Eton, Lady Ida was tried, convicted, and jailed for three months. In Holloway Prison she behaved exactly as she did at home—lying contentedly in bed, surrounded by flowers. The shock of his mother's imprisonment led to Sachie's permanent flight from reality: "for the rest of his life he would be unable to face up to unpleasant facts."

After a brief stint in British barracks with a reserve battalion of the Grenadier Guards during the Great War, Sachie entered Balliol College, Oxford. But he soon became bored and left without taking a degree. The Sitwells fired their first salvo (or squib) against the Philistines with the joint publication of their poetry in *Wheels* (1916). They sponsored an exhibition of avant-garde French art in 1919; and concluded their opening offensive with a performance of *Façade* (1923), in which they bellowed their strange poetry from behind a painted curtain and through primitive amplifiers, accompanied by the music of William Walton. Though Sachie's poetry was characteristically limp and prosaic—"That was my first beginning,/ And you prompted it,/ My sister;/ Were ever such hands as yours for poetry?"—Edith, subjecting it to counter-productive hyperbole, announced: "we have living among us today a poet as great as Milton."

In 1924 Sachie began to break his siblings' quasi-incestuous stranglehold by falling in love with the "direct, down-to-earth, highly sexed, materialistic, ruthless and socially ambitious" Georgia Doble, the daughter of a Canadian banker. She remained married to Sachie for fifty-five years, but was consistently adulterous. Her lovers included the British Fascist Oswald Mosley, Matisse's son-in-law, the French ambassador to England, and, during World War II, a humble police captain. Sachie, a complaisant cuckold, had an affair with Lady Bridget Parsons and then cultivated romantic but unconsummated attachments with two English ballerinas.

He was not cut out to be a father. He disliked parental responsibility, did not allow his sons to interfere with his own enjoyment, and expected the equally selfish Georgia to concentrate on his life rather than on the children's. Like Zelda Fitzgerald, Georgia was bored, resentful, and desperate for amusement whenever her husband was working, and distracted him with her craving for luxuries, her love of Society, and her numerous affairs.

During the rest of his long life Sachie, who died in 1988, occupied himself with writing, traveling, endless parties in fashionable houses (with exotic names like Seaton Delaval, Nether Lypiatt, and Monk Hepton), and with leeching off rich patrons like Bryher (the Cunard heiress) and the Duke of Westminster. Sachie's artist friends included Cecil Beaton, Harold Acton, Siegfried Sassoon, Arthur Waley, Evelyn Waugh, Cyril

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Connolly, Anthony Powell, and Peter Quennell, most of whom recorded their impressions of his character. But his intensely close connection with Osbert precluded real intimacy with any of his circle.

Though his income was only £2,000 a year, Sachie always lived well, and well beyond his means, and quarreled endlessly with his family (and with Osbert's rapacious lover) about money. Swindled out of his inheritance by a Swiss bank clerk who latched on to Sir George at the end of his life, Sachie lost Montegufoni to Osbert and Renishaw to his son, and in 1950 was forced to sell his own house, Weston, in Northamptonshire, to pay off his staggering debt of £20,000.

Sachie never had the great literary success that Osbert enjoyed with his autobiography *Left Hand, Right Hand!* and Edith with *Fanfare for Elizabeth* when their literary fortunes, which had plunged during the sober 1930s, unexpectedly revived during and after World War II. Though Sarah Bradford discusses Sachie's reviews and reputation, she does not, in the end, offer an estimate of his work. Sachie wrote more than seventy volumes and—like the unfortunate Leonard Bast in *Howards End*—was buried by his mountain of books. He wrote five works on Baroque art (which matched his own theatrical, exaggerated, and sometimes grotesque character) and two on Gothic art; two rather good volumes on genre painting; studies of Scarlatti, Mozart, Liszt, and Offenbach; a quantity of superficial, inaccurate, and carelessly written pot-boilers on Edinburgh, Rumania, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Malta, Mauretania, Denmark, Austria, the Andes, Japan, and Southeast Asia; many coffee-table tomes on ballet, flowers, birds, porcelain, and poltergeists; and a mass of unreadable poetry (which he finally had to publish himself). Late in life, self-absorbed as always, he rarely read new works, "preferring to furrow through dog-eared copies of his own books."

In his last year Sachie told an interviewer that he had not had the success that he deserved. He felt that he "ought to be known as a really first-rate poet. . . . And a damn good prose writer too." But posterity has not sustained this judgment. Only about ten of his books remain in print (mostly in library reprints) and very few are still read today. As Lewis and Leavis had predicted, the personalities of the Sitwells were more significant than their work.

Joyful Noyes

Spencer Klaw Without Sin:
The Life and Death
of the Oneida Community.
Allen Lane/The Penguin Press,
337 pages, $25

reviewed by Marc M. Arkin

Early one winter morning in 1835, John Humphrey Noyes sensed trouble in the making. He stole away from his comfortable lodgings in Brimfield, Massachusetts, and, as he later recalled, "took a bee-line on foot" through snow and below-zero temperatures to his home in Putney, Vermont, some sixty miles distant. Less than a year before, Noyes had declared himself not only eternally saved but free from sin; now he'd come to Brimfield to enjoy the fellowship of other Christian Perfectionists and to proselytize for this latest efflorescence of the religious revivals sweeping the nation. Instead, he found himself uncomfortable with the group of "handsome, brilliant young women" Brimfield's Perfectionist circle attracted. After an evening in their company, Noyes confessed, he "became afraid of them and of myself." Accordingly, he fled to less charged precincts.

Noyes's fears were well placed. Soon after his departure, two of the young women decided to put their own freedom from sin to the test. Together, they entered the room of a fellow Perfectionist, Simon Lovett, and the three spent the night in one bed, emerging the next morning to claim the "innocence of Shakerism." The incident gained notoriety as the "Brimfield Bundling," after

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the early New England custom of permitting betrothed couples to sleep in the same bed, separated by a "bundling board"—a custom that made a substantial contribution to the New England birthrate.

Despite his worry that scandal would bring Perfectionism into disrepute, within ten years Noyes himself had abandoned the strictures of conventional sexual morality. His concerns, however, proved prophetic, as is well demonstrated by Spencer Klaw's diverting new book on the Oneida Community. Although Oneida, which Noyes founded to embody his vision of Perfectionism through Biblical Communism, flourished for thirty years—far longer than any similar utopian venture—it is most remembered for the sexual freedom enjoyed by its members and for its practices of group marriage, male continence, and eugenics.

By the early 1840s, Noyes, like many contemporaries, was convinced that the kingdom of God was near at hand. Gathering a small group of followers, he retreated to Putney to live in imitation of the primitive church and to wait. With his attention thus powerfully concentrated on the end times, Noyes read the gospel in an idiosyncratic fashion, interpreting the message that, at the resurrection, the saved would "neither marry nor be married" as a promise that the newly risen would celebrate their blessed estate through sexual activity with the other saints.

Sometime after 1846, Noyes revised his views on the imminence of the kingdom, extending the time-frame indefinitely. Unwilling to postpone further the millennial tranformation of *agape* into *eros*, however, he introduced the saints' "complex matrimony" among his followers. Less charitable readers might be inclined to believe that, uninterested in his wife, Harriet, whom he had married for her money, Noyes had fallen in love with a married disciple, Mary Cragin, and wished to consummate the relationship in this life rather than the next.

Whatever the proferred religious rationale, the Putney locals took a dim view of the goings-on at the Noyes establishment. In 1847, Noyes was arrested on a charge of adultery. After a prudent flight, in 1848, he and his followers reconstituted themselves in Oneida, in upper New York state.

This was a time in which Ralph Waldo Emerson could complain to the socialist Thomas Carlyle that "we are a little wild here with numberless projects for social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket." Burned over by successive waves of revivals, upper New York state was home to every new movement ranging from Mormonism to temperance and women's rights. In this fervid atmosphere, the newly christened Oneida Community found fertile ground. By year's end, the community had eighty-seven members; after two years, the number had grown to two hundred and the group had begun satellite establishments to take up the overflow.

The Oneidans' interests were not limited to the cultivation of the sexual side of spirituality. Following Noyes's lead, they dabbled in virtually every intellectual and religious current of the era. In their community organization, they were deeply influenced by the writings of the utopian socialists Charles Fourier and Albert Brisbane, whose sway over the Transcendentalists had led George Ripley to organize Brook Farm and Nathaniel Hawthorne to write *The Blithedale Romance*. In their personal health, Oneidans took up and abandoned every fad from the Graham diet (after nutritional reformer Sylvester Graham, for whom the graham cracker is named) to faith healing and mind cure (later popularized by Christian Science), settling at last on the efficacy of Turkish baths, massage, and a restrained dose of conventional medicine. In their religious life, their interests ranged from spiritualism—forbidding ouija boards because they communicated with less developed souls, but inviting the members of the primitive church to "drop in" at any time—to the latest German biblical criticism. They were convinced phrenologists, Darwinists, and eugenicists—though, as George Bernard Shaw pointed out, they were spared

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the main dilemma of eugenics, since their aim obviously was to breed another Noyes. In a century devoted to self-improvement, they studied shorthand, Hebrew, geometry, and music, in no particular order, for as Noyes believed, the cultivation of a professional level of expertise in any field would detract from the communal ethos.

Indeed, Noyes was a remarkably astute observer of what went into building a communal structure. Decrying the spirit of selfishness, Noyes instituted regular sessions of mutual criticism in which Oneidans would candidly discuss the faults of a chosen member, faults that ranged from insufficient respect for community values to poor conversational habits and inadequate sexual technique. Noyes designed the Community home to have few private spaces sufficient for gatherings; even bedrooms were only large enough for one person. In this way, Noyes and his senior advisors retained control of "interviews," as Oneidans discreetly called meetings for the purpose of sexual relations, because they controlled the spaces in which Oneidans met. Unsurprisingly, these leaders also developed a system of "ascending fellowship" by which the young were introduced to sexual relations by the senior and more spiritual members of the community, a system which served to strengthen both the bonds of the community and the power of the leadership.

What with the level of public scrutiny given sexual activity, Noyes should hardly have been surprised—much less disappointed—to discover that Oneidans showed too little inclination to taste the joys of complex marriage rather than too much. David Lodge could have had the Oneidans in mind when he had the fictional Morris Zapp remark that sex is a sublimation of the work instinct. Despite all appearances to the contrary, Oneidans—including Noyes—had a hard-headed practical streak, and, for such ostensibly woolly-headed people, a genius for making money. They first manufactured a highly successful steel animal trap and later diversified into sewing silk and the well-known flatware. Such was the bedrock bourgeois nature of the Oneidans that they were not above a little wartime profiteering.

Thus, unlike most utopian communities, Oneida did not come to grief when the larder finally went bare. Instead, it failed over what a modern world might call the crisis in the institutionalization of charisma. Oneida was fundamentally the projection of the extraordinary personality of one man, John Humphrey Noyes. When Noyes tried to pass on his leadership to his son Theodore, an intelligent and extremely likable person but lacking Noyes's forceful character and magnetism, he opened the enterprise to faction and ultimate dissolution. The drama may have played itself out over complex marriage, but, *pace* Klaw, it was not *about* sex. While Noyes may have shown unfortunate blindness to Theodore's weaknesses, the underlying problem lay in the dilution of the communal impulse in the second generation of Oneidans, people who had neither separated from the world to join the community nor helped to build it. Without the first generation's animating spirit, all that was left was the business venture. After some truly tragic death throes, the Oneidans transformed their ownership interest in the community into a joint stock corporation, generously provided for the weaker brethren, and, in 1879, set about the business of business.

Spencer Klaw tells this story with verve and style, although the book is not without its faults. For a work that promises in its title to treat the religious basis of the Oneida Community, *Without Sin* takes a rather superficial approach to the theological movements that animated the Oneidans. Although Klaw clearly has command of the source materials, there are too few footnotes for the book to be of use to the serious scholar. In addition, Klaw seems unduly influenced by Theodore Noyes's account of the Oneida break-up, which, for obvious reasons, requires careful handling. Klaw also admits almost total reliance on Maren Lockwood Carden's 1969 book, *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*, for his

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final chapter. As a final scholarly complaint, the book contains minor factual errors that may disconcert a careful reader.

Klaw's approach is primarily anecdotal; the virtues of the book therefore also feed its failings. In particular, the book is short on wider themes and historical context. Noyes was hardly the only person during the antebellum period to believe that some of his contemporaries would never taste death; take the Millerites, a group that popular history remembers standing on the rooftops of their homes in white sheets waiting to be taken up bodily to heaven and who recorded their sorrow as "The Great Disappointment" before regrouping themselves as Adventists. Nor were Oneidans the only people to make the journey from radicalism to erstwhile respectability as the nineteenth century progressed; Orestes Augustus Brownson moved from Presbyterian to Transcendentalist to socialist to Catholic convert and apologist in a single stormy lifetime, and Margaret Fox moved from famous spiritualist and medium to a middle-class married woman who recanted all. The story of Oneida would profit if set in the context of this restless, bumptious century.

In the final analysis, Klaw seems overtaken by his sources and overly entranced by his subjects. Given the material, these are both understandable failings. The Oneidans recorded everything they did for posterity and they wrote copiously and with enviable style. For all his faults, Noyes charms even in the quoted excerpts from his writings. And despite this reader's earlier cavils, Klaw makes the most of his story. The book is a good read. After all, the tale of earnest young radicals who seek to reform the world by the example of their communal lifestyle and experimentation in sexual, dietary, and religious matters—who end up prosperous capitalists almost despite themselves—is hardly without interest or precedent in these latter days of the twentieth century. As the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us, there is nothing new under the sun.

Shorter notices

Sean Street The Wreck of the Deutschland. Souvenir Press (London), 208 pages, £15.99

The story of the wreck of the German steamship *Deutschland*, one of the worst shipping disasters ever to occur off the coast of Great Britain, was dramatically told in the London *Times* of December 11, 1875: "Five German nuns . . . clasped hands and were drowned together, the chief sister, a gaunt woman, six feet high, calling out loudly and often, 'O Christ come quickly,' until the end came." The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, training for the priesthood at a remote Jesuit college in North Wales, was so fired by the extraordinary circumstances of the disaster and the terrible, heroic plight of those sisters, that he broke his vow to cease writing poetry—it had seemed incompatible with his commitment to serve God—and wrote one of the greatest odes in the English language, "The Wreck of the Deutschland." A news story had been converted into a great work of art.

But the version that the poet read in those cuttings from the *Times* was only a small portion of this long-running story. The five Franciscan nuns on board the ship had been effectively driven out of Germany by Bismarck's undeclared war upon Catholicism and all its works. Bismarck, that choleric insomniac, was the very embodiment of the strut and swagger of Prussian feudalism; and the *Kulturkampf* that he was determined to pursue against all perceived enemies of the newly united Germany intensified in the 1870s—thanks, in part, to the Vatican's recent promulgation of the decree of papal infallibility. All sisters in Prussia were obliged to report monthly to the police authorities; all religious instruction was to cease forthwith. Only nursing was to be tolerated.

The five sisters, abandoning the small town in Westphalia where the Salzkotten foundation had been established, set out for a new life of ministry in North America. The *Deutschland* itself, pride of the German Lloyd company, was a vessel that possessed

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superior accommodation—the main saloon was paneled in bird's eye maple and the pilasters of oak were inlaid with rosewood. The nuns, of course, traveled in steerage. Unfortunately, the weather conditions on the day of departure and thereafter were treacherous, and as the ship approached the Kentish coast, the crew found itself blinded and helpless.

Sean Street's magisterial reconstruction of the terrible last hours of the ship as she drifted toward the Kentish Knock, a notorious, sprawling sandbank near the mouth of the Thames estuary, could scarcely be more painful: many died by suicide or drowning in the appalling weather conditions; others clung desperately to the ship's rigging until frostbite loosened their grip and their bodies plunged into the sea; one woman, tied to the mast by her brother in order to save her from being engulfed by the rising waters, died tragically of exposure. Thirty hours after the ship had got into distress, the steam tug *Liverpool* appeared and many were rescued—though forty-four died.

And then came the extraordinary aftermath. The vessel that was to be sent from Bremerhaven as a substitute for the *Deutschland* was blown up on the quayside as it waited to depart. One hundred and twenty-eight people died and a further 156 were wounded in this disaster. It had been an act of sabotage that went fatally wrong. A chest of dynamite had been destined to explode at sea, but the timing device proved faulty. The saboteur himself, a Mr. William Thomas from Dresden, a one-time blockade runner in the American Civil War, had expected to collect on a massive insurance claim.

The wreck of the *Deutschland* was widely reported in the press, and the funeral of the four nuns (not five, as Hopkins claims, one of a number of factual infelicities), whose bodies had been taken to Stratford Friary, East London, was a massive civic occasion. Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, gave the oration, and used it as an opportunity to express solidarity with the beleaguered Catholic Church in Germany—and, perhaps indirectly, to protest against the treatment of Jesuits in England too. For had not the *Times* lately described them as a "very great nuisance" and an "unscrupulous conspiracy bent on dissolving society"? A later chronicler reported that forty thousand people had lined the streets from Stratford to the Roman Catholic Cemetery of Leytonstone where the sisters' bodies were laid to rest.

And the affair rumbled on. A leading Berlin commercial journal virtually declared war upon the British Government for neglecting the ship's distress calls. A diplomatic incident was narrowly averted. An official British inquiry into the disaster found the captain guilty of gross negligence; but a later German one cleared him of all charges. The *Times* encouraged a debate upon the issues thrown up by the sinking: ought not Harwich, the nearest port, to have its own lifeboat? Couldn't anything be done to improve ship-to-shore communications?

Harwich got its lifeboat and a great poem was written—intriguingly, by the son of a man whose father made his money in marine insurance; and that firm of average adjusters—Manley Hopkins & Sons & Cookes—exists in the City of London to this day in Folgate Street, E1. And, by way of a further coincidence, Gerard Manley Hopkins himself was born in Stratford, East London, just across the road from the church where Cardinal Manning praised the heroism of those noble Catholic sisters with an entirely forgivable degree of hyperbolical inaccuracy.

The poem remained unpublished for nearly half a century. Hopkins had offered it to a Jesuit journal, but the editor's advisor, reeling at its complexity, said it had given him a very bad headache and, frankly, that it was unreadable:

> Away in the loveable west,
> On a pastoral forehead of Wales,
> I was under a roof here, I was at rest,
> And they the prey of the gales;
> She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly
> Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails

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> Was calling 'O Christ, Christ, come quickly':
> The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens
> her wild-worst Best . . .
>
> —*Michael Glover*

Lynn Horth, editor
Herman Melville: Correspondence.
Northwestern University Press/
The Newberry Library,
923 pages, $89.95; $29.95 paper

This new edition of Melville's correspondence is the latest offering in the nearly completed "Writings of Herman Melville" series from Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library. Its arrival is welcome, not only because the last comprehensive collection of Melville's letters—edited by Merrell Davis and William Gilman and published by Yale in 1960—has long been out of print, but also because much new material, including over fifty letters and a cache of family papers, has since come to light. Edited by Lynn Horth, this new *Correspondence* includes all 313 surviving letters by Melville, the earliest of which was written in 1828, when Melville was nine, and the latest in 1890, the year before Melville's death at seventy-two. The book incorporates and expands on the Davis and Gilman edition and includes letters addressed to Melville, thereby providing a more detailed picture of a lifetime's interactions with family, friends, publishers, and others. Like all the volumes in the Northwestern–Newberry series, this one is meticulously edited and includes thorough notes and other useful textual apparatuses and indices.

Correspondence will be a valuable resource for anyone interested in the complex relation between Melville's life and work. Yet it must be noted that the volume represents only an indeterminable fraction of the writer's correspondence. Melville apparently was in the habit of burning many of the letters written to him, and family members also destroyed letters and papers in the interest of privacy. It should be noted, too, that except in those addressed to his close literary friends, in particular Evert Duyckinck and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville tended not to reveal very much of himself in his letters; and unfortunately his friendships with both Duyckinck and Hawthorne foundered for various reasons in the early 1850s. Thereafter, no correspondent was consistently able to draw forth Melville's "inmost me," although some, like his Albany cousin Catherine Gansevoort Lansing, attained an amiable, undemanding rapport with him.

Melville's reticence should not surprise us. Despite his deep enjoyment of male camaraderie, he was an exceptionally private man. Moreover, his whole literary career dramatized the problem—or more frequently the failure—of communication. Early on, Melville complained about the obstacles he encountered in his effort to be "frank" with his readers. As he matured, his efforts at "truth-telling" were increasingly counterbalanced by a philosophical and religious skepticism, leading to an obsession with the ineffable and the inscrutable.

Nevertheless, Melville's correspondence intermittently helps to illuminate his literary career. After a sparsely documented youth that included four years as a sailor and beachcomber in the Pacific in the early 1840s, Melville emerged as a literary figure with the publication of *Typee* in 1846. Over the next five years he published as many novels, gradually crystallizing his ambition to write a great work of the imagination that would help establish a distinctly American literature. The good-natured, high-spirited letters to his New York friend Evert Duyckinck provide a record of this period of intellectual growth and professional apprenticeship in the literary marketplace. Writing from his new home in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in December 1850, Melville, in the midst of producing *Moby-Dick*, conveyed both the excitement and apprehension that accompanied his literary labors at this time:

> Can you send me about fifty fast-writing youths, with an easy style & not averse to polishing their labors? If you can, I wish you

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would, because since I have been here I have planned about that number of future works & cant find enough time to think about them separately. — But I dont know but a book in a man's brain is better off than a book bound in calf — at any rate it is safer from criticism. And taking a book off the brain, is akin to the ticklish & dangerous business of taking an old painting off a panel — you have to scrape off the whole brain in order to get at it with due safety — & even then, the painting may not be worth the trouble.

Yet the famous sequence of letters to Hawthorne from 1850 to 1852, at the apogee of Melville's career, is more representative of his ebullient, imperial self in creative communion with a literary peer. Especially noteworthy in this sequence is the letter responding to Hawthorne's praise of *Moby-Dick* in November 1851—a letter indicative of Melville's growing alienation from the literary marketplace:

My peace and my supper are my reward, my dear Hawthorne. So your joy-giving and exultation-breeding letter is not my reward for my ditcher's work with that book, but is the good goddess's bonus over and above what was stipulated for — for not one man in five cycles, who is wise, will expect appreciative recognition from his fellows, or any one of them. Appreciation! Recognition! Is Jove appreciated? Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of his great allegory — the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended. I say your appreciation is my glorious gratuity. In my proud, humble way, — a shepherd-king, — I was lord of a little vale in the solitary Crimea; but you have now given me the crown of India.

By the mid-1850s, however, with the decline of his reputation, Melville's letters shrink to factual bulletins to publishers and then, after he gave up writing fiction in the late 1850s (and after an abortive career as a lecturer), they are mainly addressed to family members and a few stray friends. We learn, for example, virtually nothing about the disasters of *Pierre* (1852)—refused by Melville's British publisher—or Melville's next novel, *The Isle of the Cross*, which was rejected by his American publisher and was probably destroyed. Some outspoken opinions creep into his later correspondence to various members of the extensive and close-knit Melville clan; but they are quickly suppressed in favor of the stoical geniality that he cultivated in his later years. A laborious twenty-year stint in the New York custom house (1866–1885) confirmed Melville's interior exile from his culture, yet during that time he nevertheless managed to complete his long narrative poem, *Clarel* (1876), which he flippantly characterized to a British admirer as "a metrical affair, a pilgrimage or what not, of several thousand lines, eminently adapted for unpopularity."

Most of the details of Melville's emotional life during his years of drudgery as a governmental employee must be inferred rather than directly gleaned from his letters. This is particularly true of two unsettling events of 1867: first, the near break-up of his marriage due to his wife's belief that he was insane, and then, a few months later, the suicide of his eldest son, Malcolm. *Correspondence* includes two recently discovered letters to the Melvilles' Unitarian minister, the Reverend Henry W. Bellows, from Melville's wife and brother-in-law concerning his wife's plan to leave him; but the necessary evidence to evaluate the tenor of Melville's marriage or the quality of his family life is lacking. In this sense, these letters may be more for scholars than for general readers; but even with their silences and lacunae they contribute to our knowledge of the protean creative development and the public and private ordeals that characterized Melville's career as a great American writer.

—Jonathan Cook

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Letters

The ACLU & the *Finley* case

To the Editors:
Thank you for publishing my letter (November 1993) correcting misapprehensions in your June report on the MOMA/free-expression event. Unfortunately, your reply to my letter is also erroneous. The ACLU did not receive $202,000 in legal fees: *three* organizations—the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the ACLU—shared the portion of the settlement designated to compensate for attorney's fees *as well as* legal expenses. That amount would have been lower had the government not dragged out the case for nearly three years, in the process withholding numerous documents that were not produced until plaintiffs' counsel had expended much time and expense.

Reimbursement of attorney's fees and costs to prevailing plaintiffs in meritorious civil-rights and constitutional law cases is intended to encourage the bringing of such cases on behalf of individuals who are usually not able to pay private law firm rates. By providing reimbursement of fees and costs to public-interest lawyers and organizations like the three that shared the award in *Finley*, Congress recognizes that such organizations perform an important public service when they take on civil-rights and civil-liberties cases.

Marjorie Heins
Director & Staff Counsel
Arts Censorship Project
American Civil Liberties Union Foundation
New York, N.Y.

Henri Coulette

To the Editors:
A letter published in your journal in November 1992 and signed by a number of people only recently came to my attention. Its stated purpose was to express anger toward me for a memoir review of Henri Coulette I published in *Common Knowledge* (Spring 1992). I was accused of introducing a Dying Young Poet (their capitals) whom I portrayed in "heroic and sentimental terms and from whose mouth is made to flow a series of malicious judgments of Coulette's character and achievement." This ploy is then described as an act of "ventriloquism." The letter never identified the young poet.

The poet's name was Michael McGuire; he was a real person and not a fiction I employed. Our conversation regarding Coulette's poetry was private; those who signed the letter had no idea what he'd said or not said, nor did they make any effort to discover if I'd portrayed his death in "heroic and sentimental terms." This could have been done. I identified his friends who were with him at the end, I identified the hospice where he died, the director of the hospice, the nurse in charge of his care. All were easily reachable by telephone or letter. Those who signed the letter showed the disregard for truth they accused me of.

Philip Levine
Fresno, Calif.

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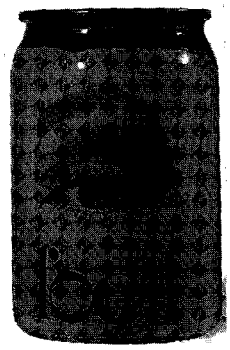

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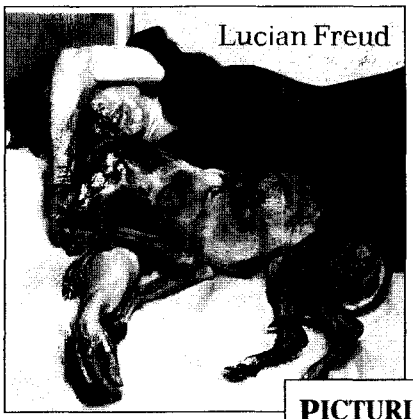

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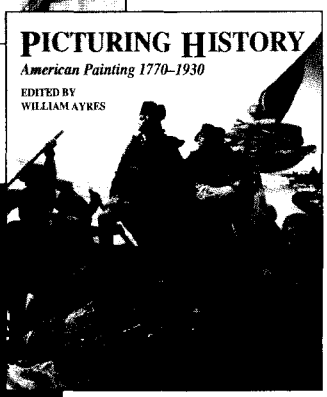

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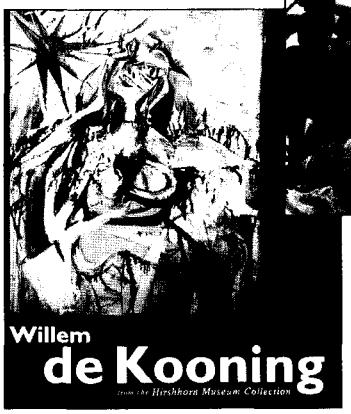

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